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ABSTRACT

The experiences of Canadian women in adult basic education and literacy (ABEL) were examined in a national research project during which 2 contact women from each of 12 ABEL programs across Canada spend one-half day each week "researching" their program's "woman-positive" activities and the consequences of those activities for staff, students, and their program as a whole. The 24 women spent their project time reflecting on their programs alone and with others, writing journals that were eventually sent to the project's coordinating researchers, and developing documentation of the personal, professional, political, and structural changes observed in their ABEL programs during the year-long research project. The 24 women represented a wide range of age groups (23-56 years old), educational levels (grade 12 to a postgraduate degree), and years of experience in adult basic education and literacy (1-20 years). The research revealed the diverse experiences of women in different ABEL programs in different parts of Canada, emphasized the difficulties in focusing attention on members of marginalized groups, highlighted the lack of information about literacy workers in Canada, and provided a model for program-based action research beginning with frontline workers' experiences. (Approximately 50% of this document is devoted to descriptions of the 12 programs studied. Contains 77 references.) (MN)

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Betty Ann Lloyd
with Frances Ennis
and Lennis Atkinson

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The power of woman-positive literacy work

and

Listen to women in literacy —
The power of woman-positive literacy work

At the first national workshop, we went into a large room and imagined that the floor had a map of Canada on it. Then we began to arrange ourselves as if we were standing where we would find our home community. The two women from Arviat, NWT, stood directly in the centre of the room. At first, we tried to convince them that they should stand at the top of the room. They would be the furthest north and the rest of us would have more room. They refused, insisting that most southerners have a very skewed sense of our country's geography, that Arviat is at the geographic centre of Canada. At the second workshop, women talked about using circle images for the poster to recognize the non-linear nature of our work. For this reason, we have arranged the program descriptions beginning with Arctic College and moving in a circle around to the east and then to the west.

The power of woman-positive literacy work

Program-based action research

Betty-Ann Lloyd

with Frances Ennis

and Tannis Atkinson

Fernwood Publishing
Halifax 1994

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Learning Opportunities for Women
Toronto 1994

We dedicate this work to women who participate in adult literacy and basic education programs as workers and as students.

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The project was nurtured and tended throughout the phase one by Pramila Aggarwal, Evelyn Battell, Frances Ennis, Dawn Elliot, Lynn Fogwill, Michele Kuhlmann, Kathleen Rockhill, and Susan Witter. The workers and students from the four literacy programs across the country who spoke from their experience and so helped shape phase two have our heartfelt thanks.

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A number of women have worked behind the scenes to edit and produce this book: Debbie Mathers, Brenda Beagan, Brenda Conroy, Christina Starr, D'Arcy Atkinson, and Sang-Mi Jeon. Thank you for doing such a wonderful job.

Another behind-the-scenes worker who has proved invaluable to CCLOW is Dianne Palachik. Thank you, Dianne, for helping to hold up the sky!

Collaboration has been a major part of this research project. Tannis Atkinson has played a key role as a writer, editor, and advisor to the project. Thank you for helping to put it all together.

And, our admiration and appreciation go to Betty-Ann Lloyd and Frances Ennis. Their combined energy, vision, dedication, determination, and conviction have made this research study a reality. Both women have criss-crossed Canada, speaking with women about the issues they face in literacy and encouraging women to explore new ways of working and thinking. Thank you for uncovering, speaking out around, and pushing forward on the issues in the field of women and literacy. CCLOW is proud to have been part of this.

Aisla Thomson, Executive Director, CCLOW
Toronto, ON

Introduction

The publication of this book marks the end of a process which began nearly five years ago. Early in 1989, members of the literacy committee of the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) began to discuss a national research project focusing on women and literacy. In 1990 CCLOW hired Betty-Ann Lloyd to explore the experiences of women in adult literacy and basic education programs and to develop a national participatory research proposal that would examine how those experiences could be improved.

The women Betty-Ann met with in the following months clearly stated that they already knew what barriers women face when trying to access basic education. They did not want to study those barriers, they wanted to make some changes. They wanted to challenge the ways in which literacy programs ignored women's lives and needs. CCLOW published Betty-Ann's report in early 1991. Discovering the strength of our voices — Women and literacy programs (Lloyd, 1991) outlined the issues raised by women and invited literacy programs across Canada to participate in the next phase of the research. The National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development, accepted the proposal that came out of this documentation and funded the long-term, national, program-based research that became phase two. Betty-Ann continued as coordinating researcher, working with CCLOW staff and members of the original advisory committee.

In November of 1991 women from twelve adult literacy and basic education programs across Canada met at a retreat centre north of Winnipeg to learn about research and begin planning their involvement in this research project. Over the eighteen months of this phase of the research thirty-two women participated in some way. In most cases, two women became the on-site researchers for their program. They shared responsibility for planning and reflecting on a woman-positive activity for their program. In several programs, one woman took primary responsibility for implementing and documenting the activity and its effects on the program. The other woman acted as a support for her co-worker, attending the three national workshops and participating in the two interviews. Frances Ennis joined Betty-Ann as a coordinating researcher after this workshop.

CCLOW paid the two contact women from each program a total of one-half day a week to "research" their woman-positive activity and its consequences for staff, students, and the program as a whole. They spent that time reflecting alone and with others, writing journals they sent to the coordinating researchers, and developing documentation of their work. The personal, professional, political, and structural changes that happened over this year demonstrate the positive effects of

providing adult literacy workers — perhaps any frontline workers — with time, support, and resources to reflect critically and creatively on their practice and the practice of others in their field.

There is a distinct and different context for each program in this research. They provide services in large urban centres and in the urban/rural mix of prairie and northern towns and cities. They are on the east and west coasts, on the Hudson Bay, and Lake Ontario. Four programs are located in community colleges, a fifth is based in a federation of labour, a sixth in a prison. The remaining six community-based programs operate in a range of locations: on the street, in storefronts, in public housing, in a Native friendship centre, and in a community centre.

These programs have a variety of mandates and organizational structures. Some of the programs included women-only groups. Others had never before considered working with women as a particular student group. The students in these programs ranged from those involved in basic literacy to those preparing to write their high school equivalency exams. Their involvement in the decision-making processes of their programs varied widely.

The women who acted as researchers also varied. With two early exceptions, they all worked as staff or volunteers in their programs. Several had been learners in those or other programs before becoming staff. They ranged in age from 23 to 56, in academic background from less than grade 12 to postgraduate degrees, and in experience from one to twenty years.

These women spent twelve months initiating, observing, and documenting the impact of the woman-positive activity chosen for their program. During that year, they were visited twice by Betty-Ann or Frances. During these visits, they took part in two in-depth interviews designed to encourage interpretation and analysis of what was happening with themselves, with other staff, and with students.

The contact women from each program also attended two additional workshops. At the second workshop, held in Mississauga in April 1992, the women raised many of the issues that had arisen in their programs over the last six months and discussed different ways of documenting their activity. The final workshop took place in November 1992 in Ottawa. At this workshop women developed a collaborative analysis of their experiences and put together recommendations for programs, policy-makers, and funders. The recommendations form a vision of a woman-positive future in adult literacy.

This research did not set out to prove any hypothesis. The women involved did not initiate their activities to prove a particular point. They simply wanted to do something that they thought would be positive for some of the women in their programs. They wanted to use this research opportunity to improve the programs in which they worked. They also wanted to share their experience with others by analyzing what happened on several levels. They explored the personal, professional, political, and structural consequences of their activities. They participated in research that was ground-breaking in a variety of ways.

- The research made visible women's experiences in a variety of literacy programs in different parts of Canada. It raised questions about how women's lives and needs are or are not taken into account in these programs. It demonstrated how funding policies contribute to the ways in which programs ignore the reality of women's lives.

- The research emphasized the difficulties faced by those who ask for attention to be paid to members of marginalized groups. Several women confronted personal and professional risks in starting their woman-positive activities. Others had to deal with ignorance, ongoing passive resistance, and persistent apathy. The research gave women the support to continue despite these obstacles.

- The research allowed some literacy workers time to reflect on their work, to find support from others, and to analyze their common and diverse experiences. It provided extraordinary professional development.

- The research highlighted the lack of information about literacy workers in Canada. Although we know that most adult literacy workers are women, we became increasingly curious about how that fact related to the lack of funding and status for literacy. The research helped the women involved become more aware of their need to take care of themselves.

- The research design and methodology provides a model for program-based action research that begins with frontline workers' lived experiences, involves them in collecting data, analyzing information, and developing solutions to identified problems.

From the beginning, the women involved in this research have been concerned about documenting their findings and making them available to others grappling with similar issues and questions. This research highlights the lack of relevant, woman-positive materials for staff and students in adult literacy programs. It has also made distressingly clear the lack of resources and supports for women attempting to make their workplaces more positive for women. The result is that our findings have been published in three books.

Women in literacy speak — The power of woman-positive literacy work includes the material that the programs developed to document their woman-positive activities. This documentation comes primarily from the perspective of program workers, though in some cases programs documented their experiences by publishing student writing. Each piece in this collection grows out of the specific context of a particular program, the community in which it is located, and the woman or women who wrote it. Gaining confidence, taking chances and making choices within the particular context of their lives, they chart the woman-positive ripples of their work. They demonstrate how women's lives are woven together. Uncovering fear and isolation, celebrating diversity and strength, they outline what happened to themselves and to others as they made space for woman-positive literacy work. These pieces test recipes for political action. They pursue the

politics of talking and challenge others to consider the more than semantic differences between "woman-positive" and "feminist" practices.

Listen to women in literacy — The power of woman-positive literacy work is designed as a resource for adult literacy and basic education programs. It contains a summary of the woman-positive activity in each program and outlines what the women involved learned. The format includes questions to help people think about how their programs can pay attention to the lives of women participants.

In this book

This book begins with a detailed account of the exploratory research and an outline of the research design and methodological framework for this phase, including validity practices and ethical considerations.

Coordinating researcher Betty-Ann Lloyd then takes the reader through the year-long process of description/action/reflection/discussion/documentation/interpretation/analysis. She presents the form and content of each workshop, visit, and interview. With seventy photographs and women's various descriptions of their experiences, readers have the opportunity to enter into this research from the perspective of practitioners who every day deal with the frontline work of providing adult literacy, basic education, and academic upgrading to Canadians. Through this research you can gain an understanding of the ways some women staff and students accomplished woman-positive work in their programs.

The next section includes the process through which women at the third workshop developed a collaborative analysis and recommendations. After participating in three very different interpretive activities, they used a series of questions to frame their understanding of why things happened as they did. The concluding recommendations address six arenas for action: program planning, implementation, and evaluation; provision of support services; professional education and development; coalition building; policy analysis and development; and the future direction of CCLOW.

The final section of this book begins with the personal histories, professional experiences, working conditions, and educational and political philosophies of the women who participated most directly in this research. It describes selected characteristics of students from the programs involved and provides some reflection on differences between staff and students.

This section continues with descriptions of the twelve programs, their communities, woman-positive activities, and the materials produced through the research. Each of these descriptions contain excerpts from women's interviews, journals, and published material. Photographs and captions from the project poster are reproduced, as are the front pages and covers of the programs' research documentation. The book ends with a bibliography of materials in the fields of women and education, research design and methodology, and feminist theory.

Like the rest of the research process, this book has been a collaborative effort. It has involved three writers and editors working out of Halifax, St. John's, and Whitehorse, as well as CCLOW executive director Aisla Thomson in Toronto. Throughout the process of pulling together this mass of information, the contact women from the twelve participating programs gave ongoing input and approval. We hope that their personal excitement, political commitment, and professional integrity is reflected in these pages.

Betty-Ann Lloyd	Frances Ennis	Tannis Atkinson
Halifax, NS	St. John's, NF	Whitehorse, YK

About the authors

Tannis Atkinson has ten years experience with community-based literacy in an urban setting. She has also worked for ten years as a freelance writer and editor and has a particular interest in clear language and design. She has facilitated several books of student writings, developed oral history materials, and written a variety of reports for adult literacy organizations. When this research project started, Tannis was one of the program researchers at the Toronto ALFA Centre. While completing the documentation she moved to Whitehorse.

Frances Ennis is a feminist who has had over twenty years experience working in community development and social justice, women's health, and adult literacy. She has coordinated and participated in several action research projects and is co-founder of one of the first community-based adult literacy programs in the province. During the time of this research Frances received the Muriel Duckworth award at the 1993 Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) conference for her work in action research. She is currently co-principal of a small firm based in St. John's which specializes in the design and implementation of distance education programs.

Betty-Ann Lloyd has developed her theory and practice of action research over the last fifteen years as a journalist, activist in the women's community, policy analyst, adult educator, and student. After completing a study of adult literacy in Nova Scotia, she worked within the provincial literacy bureaucracy, focusing on policy development for community-based programing and action research with workplace programs. During her three-year involvement with the CCLOW women and literacy project, she finished course work and preliminary examinations for a Ph.D. in adult education at Dalhousie University. Betty-Ann's academic work continues to explore how front-line workers can use their participation in research as a tool for personal, professional, and political development.

Section 1:

Program-based action research

by Betty-Ann Lloyd

Research Design and Methodology

Description / Reflection

Action / Reflection

Discussion / Reflection

Interpretation

Collaborative Analysis

Recommendations

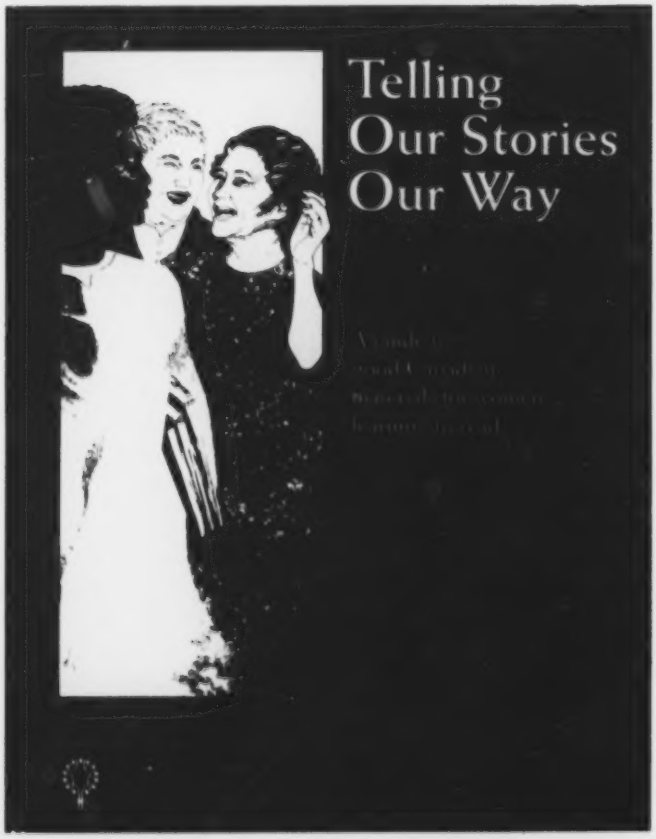
1

Background

1-1 Exploratory research — Discovering the strength of our voices

For the last fifteen years, the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) has advocated for adult literacy policies, programs, practice, and materials that meet the needs of women in the context of their communities and their everyday lives. Working on its own and in coalition with other organizations, the national organization and its networks have represented the particular concerns of adult women students and staff.

As a national, voluntary, feminist organization, CCLOW has sponsored several research studies and reports about women's experience with adult literacy and basic education programs. (For example, DeCoito, 1984; MacKeracher, n.d.; Wismer, 1988) Its Learning Resource Centre responds to requests for information on women and literacy from across Canada. Its 1989 brochure, "Let's talk about women and literacy," identifies some of the barriers which block women's participation in literacy programs and proposes ways in which literacy programs can be made more accessible to women. Telling our stories our way (1990) provides a guide to good Canadian materials for women learning to read.



With this research project, CCLOW continued its work with women and literacy. In January 1990, eight women from across Canada spoke by teleconference with Aisla Thomson,

Discovering the Strength of Our Voices

Women and literacy programs

by Betty-Ann Lloyd

(An report from phase one of a research project)

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- 1-2 The research process during this first phase
- 1-3 The "facts" concerning the visits to four Canadian communities

2 Four vignettes: What does it mean to think and talk about ourselves as "women"?
- 2-1 What do we do when we begin to talk among ourselves as women?
- 2-2 When we begin to listen to women's stories, what do we hear about ourselves?
- 2-3 Why do we need to pay attention to women's stories once we begin to hear them?
- 2-4 When we hear women's stories about their lives, how do we begin to "do" literacy?

3 How can we understand what we hear when we listen to women
- 3-1 The words women spoke during the visits have been organized into 21 themes
- 3-2 These themes clarified the issues and assumptions behind this first phase
- 3-3 Reflecting on the themes, issues and assumptions led to certain interpretations
- 3-4 Three questions focussed the reflections that came out of this first phase

4 What do we want to do next? What could the second phase of this research look like?
- 4-1 The questions that can inform the process of the second, action/participatory phase
- 4-2 The commitment of CCLOW for the second phase
- 4-3 The commitment of the programs that participate
- 4-4 Possible program activities during the second phase of the research

Executive Director of CCLOW. In the first of many meetings, they discussed different possibilities for a study on women and literacy. By March, they had developed goals for a two-phase project:

- to examine how gender and the power balance of the male/female relationship affect women's access to, and experience of, literacy programs and how it affects the impact of literacy programs on women,
- to determine how literacy programs and literacy practice might be changed to better respond to the reality of the lives of adult women learners, and
- to share this information with women literacy students and workers, through print materials and in workshops, to foster the development of relevant, appropriate, and accessible literacy learning opportunities for women.

They wanted to find out how gender affects women's experiences in literacy programs and how those experiences could be improved, and they wanted to share what they found out with others. These eight women formed an advisory committee for the research.

The objectives of this first exploratory phase were:

- to talk with women students and workers involved in literacy programs,
- to develop key questions out of the "data" of the women's stories, and
- to develop a research design to investigate these questions further using an action research model.

After being hired to conduct this exploratory research, I spent the spring and summer visiting with advisory committee members and literacy program staff, volunteers, and students in four communities: Duncan, BC; St. John's, NF; Toronto, ON; and Arviat, NWT. I constructed a series of questions after each of these visits. Reviewing these questions and the formal and informal discussions I had during this time, I identified several important themes. These themes generated issues for further research.

In September 1990, CCLOW accepted the report, Discovering the strength of our voices: Women and literacy programs (Lloyd, 1991a). It was published early the next year. A central discovery of phase one was that, despite the many practical barriers to women's participation, women do want to take part in literacy and upgrading programs as students and as staff. Women know what these barriers are — no further research would be needed to identify them. Instead, it was time to do something about the barriers, to build on women's strengths, and to work with what we already know about the ways women learn. It seemed that if literacy programs want to honour women's stories, then they must begin to change the way they do their literacy work. What they needed was an opportunity to find out what happens when they attempt some of those changes.

Phase one assumptions identified by the advisory committee	Phase one issues identified by the advisory committee
• women's lack of access to literacy is directly related to the structure of women's lives	• the need to document individual women's stories to identify how the structure of women's lives restrict their participation in literacy programs
• learning can be an empowering experience for women	• the need for action-oriented research as a tool to identify women's experience within literacy programs
• women's experience of violence in all facets of their lives hinders their participation in literacy programs	• the need to develop a feminist approach to facilitating women's participation in program research
Phase one assumptions added by the researcher	**Phase one issues added by the researcher**
• women "participants" include women literacy workers as well as students, and those women experience, in their work as well as in their homes and community, the reality of living in a sexist society	• the need to provide expertise and assistance to programs — particularly mixed-gender programs — that are involved in, or want to be involved in, providing woman-positive learning settings
• women who participate in programs — particularly in mixed-gender programs — are in a vulnerable position when they explore woman-positive learning activities	• the need to recognize concerns about the experience and participation of men as they relate to women in the programs
• programs that have a learner-centred approach are not necessarily woman-positive	• the need to understand the role of feminist critical consciousness in the context of literacy programming
• not only can literacy programs affect women's lives, but women's lives must affect the practices of literacy programs	• the need to document the experience of literacy programs involved in woman-positive learning activities

(Discovering the strength of our voices, p. 48)

At the end of this exploratory phase, three research questions emerged for phase two:

- What happens within programs where woman-positive activities take place with the knowledge of administration or management, staff, volunteers, and students? How do the programs change?
- What can we learn about "learner-centred" and "woman-positive" approaches by carrying out research around the activities outlined above? How are these approaches different in theory and in practice?
- What is the experience of women who participate in woman-positive activities within literacy programs? What is the experience of those who do not participate?

To fulfil one of the objectives for the exploratory stage of the research, I developed a funding proposal for a national program-based action research project. This proposal outlined a two-year research project involving two contact women from each of ten adult literacy or basic upgrading programs. These programs would be selected to represent a variety of geographic locations, program approaches, and community sizes.

The women in each program would plan, implement, document, and evaluate a woman-positive activity — however they might define that within the context of their community and program. They would ensure that the activity was visible in the program and would reflect upon and document its impact. They would give the women who participated in the activity an opportunity to take part in its documentation and evaluation.

We anticipated that the woman-positive activities might range from reviewing literacy materials of interest to women, to organizing a women-only class or group that would meet regularly to work on literacy skills.

CCLOW would pay the contact women from each program for a total of one-half day each week during which the women might think about, talk about, or write about what was happening because of the woman-positive activity in their program. A coordinating researcher would provide ongoing support for the contact women, including visits to each site. She would also bring all the contact women together in three national workshops to give them opportunities to develop research methods, and to decide how they might plan, implement, document, and analyze their woman-positive activities.

During the first national workshop, women would be introduced to the action research process, including reflective writing, and we would explore the range of possibilities for woman-positive activities within their programs. In the second workshop we would talk about the issues arising in each program and how women might document these issues. In the third workshop, we would develop an analysis and recommendations.

During the entire research process, women would participate in at least two

interviews. They would write in a research journal approximately every second week. The final product of the research would be decided during the research process by the women involved.

Given the federal/provincial nature of funding for adult literacy programing in Canada, the woman-positive activity itself would have to be financially supported by the program. Only the research could be supported by the National Literacy Secretariat.

We expected ten programs to become involved in the one-year action research phase. Some would engage in short-term activities, others would be involved for the full twelve months. Given the instability of program funding and staffing in the field of adult literacy, we optimistically hoped that eight would still be involved by the end. As it turned out, however, we accepted twelve programs and all of them continued for the eighteen-month process.

1-2 Research design: Feminist program-based action research

When developing the phase two project proposal for the National Literacy Secretariat, I began with CCLOW's expectation that the research would be feminist and, at some level, participatory. Based on the phase one analysis, it would also be located in a variety of programs and include an activity that some of the women in that program identified as woman-positive. The methodological framework for this kind of work can be found in the tradition of qualitative research as it has been adapted and extended by feminist researchers, community activists, and theorists. My own work in the area of the social organization of knowledge, experiential learning theory, feminism, postmodernism, and the politics of difference added its own influence.

The design provided ways for women who participated in the day-to-day research to influence the development of the process. The original proposal provided an overall focus, a timeline, an allocation of resources, and a framework of events (such as workshops and visits). However, the program women had control over what happened in their woman-positive activities. I expected them to use that experience to direct both the process and the content of the workshops and the documentation.

By the end of the project, most women felt that they had as much influence on the research process as they wanted. They strongly recommended that programs be given more opportunity to participate in action research that supports reflection and analysis by both staff and students. They also asked that the documentation for the project contain the theory behind the research design. Knowing that qualitative research is not always recognized as legitimate by government funders, academics, or the media, they wanted to show that this kind of powerful work has its own tradition and validity. They also wanted other

programs to understand that the research rests on a foundation. It doesn't just happen.

There are many books devoted to developing rationales and outlines for qualitative, participatory, feminist, and action research. I have included several of those works in the bibliography at the end of this book. What I would like to do here is outline the way in which we talked about action and feminist research at the beginning of the project, outline the experiential learning model that provided a framework for the work, review the research validity practices and ethics considerations, and present some of the theory that underlies this research approach.

Most women who became involved in this research had little, if any, research background. Some had completed academic research in high school, college, or university. Some had developed funding proposals and evaluations for particular projects. We could not, however, assume that those coming to the first national workshop would feel comfortable proceeding with program-based action research without some background information and tools. I wanted to explain the research design as straightforwardly as possible and to suggest that research is a distinct and definable activity. Decades of research theory and practice gave us a foundation for building our own particular project.

Action research

I use the definition of research developed by the Women's Research Centre based in Vancouver:

> Research is the systematic collection and analysis of information on a particular topic. (Barnsley & Ellis, 1992, p. 9)

Both aspects of this definition — the systematic collection of information and the analysis of that information — are central. Because the collection of information is systematic, it must be focused, planned, and documented. For that to happen, we need to be clear about the questions we are asking. We need to work out what kind of information we want to collect and then develop a strategy to collect it. We need

to include a schedule in the strategy, being realistic about time, energy, and resources. We need to work out what we might do when surprising things happen. We need to be clear about how we want to use the information we collect. When we document the process of collecting information, and document the information itself, we need to be creative about our options.

The analysis of the information we collect must also be systematic. This means we should try to include all the information we collect in the analysis. We can't leave things out just because they don't fit our individual or collective pictures of what ought to happen. We should work out what information is missing since we can never collect all the information. We should get different opinions about what the information means so that we have a variety of perspectives on what happened. Finally, we must try to be as honest and clear as possible in our analysis.

When we are doing action research, we need to add a second part to the basic definition of research.

> The systematic collection and analysis of information for the purposes of informing political action and social change. (Barnsley & Ellis, 1992, p. 9)

We are never collecting and analyzing information as objective, neutral, value-free women who are disinterested in the outcome of our work. We all do our work from a particular perspective, given our social and historical backgrounds and our personal beliefs. This particular project was sponsored by a feminist organization that wanted to find out what happens when women in a literacy program plan a woman-positive activity, then implement and document it. It expected that both political action and social change might occur if women in a program had the time, resources, and support to focus on their work and then come together with other women to discuss, document, and analyze their experience.

These activities conform to another definition of action research used in the field of education. According to Wilf Carr and Stephen Kemmis,

> Action research is a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants . . . in social . . . situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations (and institutions) in which these practices are carried out. Cited in McNiff, 1988, p. 2)

Feminist research

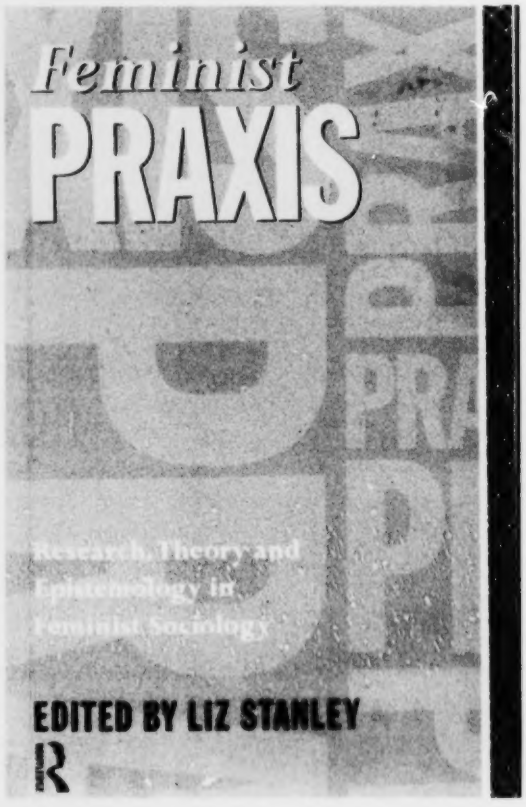
When we approach research as a way of informing political action and social change, we always approach it from a particular point of view. Although the women and programs that became involved in this project were not expected to identify as 'feminist," they were expected to agree that woman-positive activities could be useful for women because adult literacy programs do not generally begin

from the perspective of women students or staff. As stated in Discovering the strength of our voices (Lloyd, 1991a),

> All the participants must be willing to see the activity as potentially changing the program as a whole, not simply as a way to have a positive impact on individual students or workers. The women's voices that emerge from the experience must be seen as tools to re-structure the program so that it is more inclusive of this experience. (pp. 55-6)

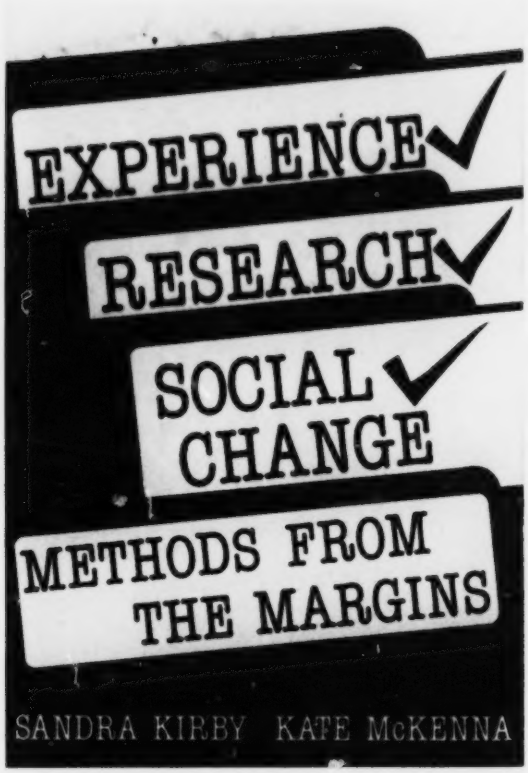
Liz Stanley, a British researcher and writer, talks about feminist research as beginning in the everyday world of women. She believes that women know certain things and understand particular experiences because we live them. We have a particular epistemology — a particular way of knowing things — because we have a particular ontology — a particular way of being in this world. Through living our lives as women, we have a particular perspective on how social relations are set up within our society, including within our adult literacy programs.

We don't all know the same things because our everyday lives are very different. For example, those of us who live in rural communities live very different lives than those of us in urban centres. Those of us who face oppression because of racism live very different lives than those of us who have privilege because of the colour of our skin. Those of us with high degrees of formal education live very different lives than those of us who have very limited formal education. Nevertheless, Stanley writes, there are some things we share simply because we are women.



Some of the things that we know and understand because of our perspective have to do with power. For many women, doing research as women, with women, means making a political commitment to uncovering the ways power gets played out in our society. It means making visible many different kinds of power relations — power relations based on sex as well as on race, class, formal education, source of income, different abilities, sexual orientation, citizenship status, geographic locations. Feminist researchers have a political commitment to making visible how these different power relations affect everyone's lives, how they result in some people living at the centre of our society and other people dwelling on the margins.

Kate McKenna and Sandy Kirby, women who currently work out of Toronto and Winnipeg respectively, have written a book about how to do research from the margins. Using their perspective, we can understand women as on the margins of a sexist society, and literacy as on the margins of an



education system that does not give priority to adult academic upgrading. They set out four processes of researching from the margins. I have adapted them to develop my own image of what it is to do research.

First of all, McKenna and Kirby talk about unmasking or uncovering what we think we know or understand already but can't really see clearly. What we want to see may be hidden completely. Or, it may be disguised, named as something else. So I have a sense of women uncovering, of moving things aside, of seeing some things in a new way, through our own eyes.

Second, they talk about creating stories that tell others what we have discovered, what we come to know and understand more clearly. By telling these stories, we pull up and pull out different aspects of what we have made visible so that we can look at them more closely. All this time, we must remember where these particular aspects of our experience have come from and where they must go back to. If we don't, any action we take may be completely ineffective because it is out of context. We must always take context into account.

Third, when we uncover what we know and experience, when we pay attention to particular aspects of that experience by telling stories about them, we begin to recognize how and why certain things have seemed invisible or masked in our lives. We begin to affirm our own and each other's pleasure and pain in this discovery. We begin to call out the names of what we are beginning to understand.

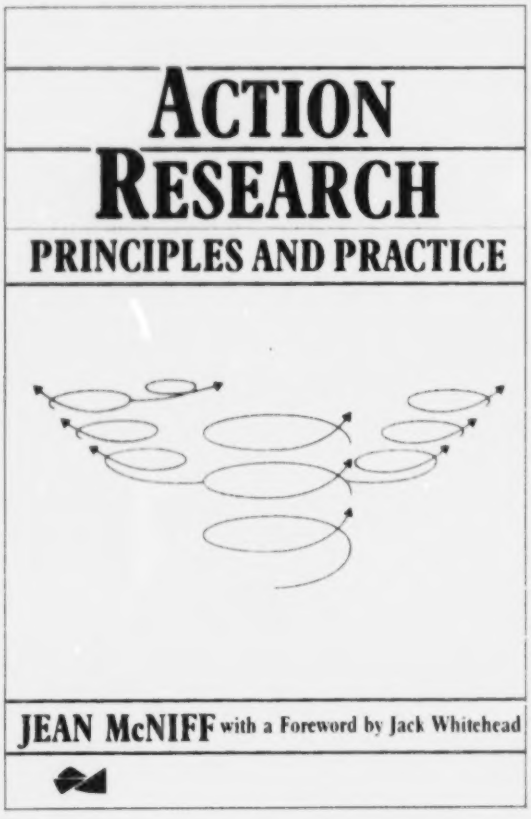
And in this way we make what we are uncovering something that others can see and hear and find with us. We share our sense of what we know and what we understand with others. In this way, we can begin to work together to change things.

So, we could be understood as basing our research on these four processes. Through the woman-positive activities we uncovered what has been hidden or silenced. Through reflection and discussion we created our stories, our understandings, and our knowledge. Through our analysis, we affirmed what we found by naming how and why it has been made invisible. Through our documentation we called out and shared our naming and our understanding with others. Then we moved on, using our knowledge to work with others, to change what we can change.

Experiential learning cycle

This sense of working from the margins within a feminist action research framework also fits within different models of experiential learning. (Kolb, 1975; Hunt, 1987; McNiff, 1988) The learning cycle can give us another way of understanding what it means to do research. As outlined on the next page, this project's research design can be broken down into four quarters. Beginning at the active experimentation stage, we had an opportunity to use our past experience to plan what might work as a woman-positive activity in our programs. Then, we had the concrete experience of doing the activity. By observing and reflecting on the activity and its consequences, we processed what happened. By documenting this process and our interpretation of the process, we moved into analysis. Developing recommendations began the cycle once again, providing guidelines for future experiences of woman-positive literacy work.

Although the experiential learning model provides a way to put the different parts of this research in order, actually doing the work was seldom this tidy. For one thing, our lives don't run on a single track. While we were reflecting on our woman-positive research, we might also have been doing several others things — experiencing a family crisis, analyzing ways to get more program funding, or experimenting with new ways of doing outreach for a political activity. Second, we all came into this project with a lifetime of experiences, reflections, interpretations, and analysis. We had already developed some understanding of how and why things might change in our particular contexts.



Third, most of us have a flat spot in our learning and working styles. For example, some of us may be very good at planning new ways of doing things and then getting them done. But our ability to stand back and look at what happens from a variety of perspectives may not be quite so developed. Or, we may have little patience or skill for analyzing why things happen the way they do.

Going into this particular research, women needed to have a sense there was no "right" way to get the work done. Most of us would feel more engaged in some parts of the process than in others. Those who love to talk things through for hours might not want to spend time trying to understand why things happened the way they did. Or, they might shy away from having to come up with some practical solutions to problems they identified. Similarly, women who want to complete one task and get on with the next might feel impatient with

Experiential Learning Cycle

Concrete experience —
our history of personal experiences as we recall them through our bodies, our minds, our hearts, and our spirits. Here is the place that we DO things and develop our senses, our words, our emotions, our basic beliefs. We often ask the question "What?"

Reflective observation —
our conscious and unconscious awareness of our experience and the experience of others, as we step back from what happens and reflect from a less engaged position. Here is the place that we REFLECT on things and develop meaning and interpretation. We often ask the question "How?"

Abstract conceptualization —
our naming of particular experiences as we categorize, organize, and make connections between what we have brought together and social systems that make up our worlds. Here is the place that we start to ANALYZE things and develop theory. We often ask the question "Why?"

Active experimentation —
our visioning and planning of new experiences as we take what we have learned and apply it to a new situation in our lives. Here is the place that we PLAN new ways of doing things. We often ask the question "Why not?" or "What next?"

Action Research Design

1: October-December 1991
Drawing on past experience, reflection, and analysis, PLAN a woman-positive activity that makes sense within your program. Attend the first workshop to talk with others and gain information that will allow you to actively experiment in your own program.

2: January-March 1992
Using the plan as a framework, DO your woman-positive activity. Remain aware of your bodies, minds, hearts and spirits. Use the coordinating researcher's first visit to move further into reflection.

3: April-June 1992
Talking with others and writing about your experience, allow yourself to REFLECT on what you have experienced and observed. Attend the second workshop to talk with other women about their reflection, interpretation, and ideas for documentation.

4: September-November 1992
Using what you have learned from your own experience, develop your documentation and read the documentation developed by others. Attend the third workshop to collaboratively ANALYZE what happened in the overall project.

women who seem to want to talk forever. For them, nothing seems to get accomplished. Some women feel threatened by confusion and a diversity of opinions. They want to know exactly what is happening and why. Others find the same situation exciting, allowing for the full expression of their creative abilities.

A linear framework for the research complemented the circular experiential learning framework. Outlined on the next page, it provided another way of understanding the research process. This framework was built around the three national workshops, two site visits, and primary activities during the periods of time between these events.

At the first national workshop, we needed to get to know each other, understand the research design, and learn about reflection as a research tool. Women could then go back to their programs to plan their woman-positive activities, set goals and objectives, and begin developing a description of their community, their program, and their activity. During this stage, they would clarify their particular focus within women and literacy.

During the first visit from a coordinating researcher, this focus was most often framed as a question to help women describe their woman-positive activity. Women could use the first interview to identify questions they might answer through their reflective writing and discussion with others.

At the second workshop, we needed to discuss issues arising from the different activities and to work out how we might document these issues. Women could then go back to their programs to collect information, reflect on their experience, and begin documenting it. During this stage, they would move to a more systematic interpretation of what was happening because of their woman-positive activity.

During the second visit from a coordinating researcher, this interpretation was used to decide on the formal documentation women would develop. They could use the second interview as an introduction to many of the questions that structured the collaborative analysis.

At the third workshop, we needed to work on a collaborative analysis and set of recommendations. Following that workshop, we would work through a six month process of developing final documentation. There would be time for women to begin thinking about what they might want to question next.

1-3 Validity practices and ethical considerations

Traditional, quantitative researchers most often employ statistical analysis to prove that their research is valid. Qualitative research has its own measures of validity. The research design includes specific practices — actual things the researcher must do — to ensure that researchers are not imposing their own interpretation of events on other research participants.

First national workshop	Reflection	Nov 1991

PLANNING IT: Describe the activity — goals and objectives

Begin to focus your research topic

First visit from coordinating researcher	Jan/Feb/Mar 1992

DOING IT: Describe the activity — what is happening

Begin to recognize the questions you might ask

Second national workshop	Documentation	Apr 1992

PROCESSING IT: Collect information about the activity

Begin to explore the questions more systematically

Second visit from coordinating researcher	Sept/Oct/Nov 1992

PRODUCING IT: Document the activity — to share

Begin to extend the questions and formally document

Third national workshop	Analysis	Nov 1992

ANALYZING IT: Respond to the final documentation

Begin to think about the next questions to ask

Feminist researcher Patti Lather (1991) suggests four validation methods. Triangulation, to establish the trustworthiness of the data; systematized reflexivity, to ensure construct validity; recycling description, analysis, and conclusions to interviewees for face validity; and possible degrees of catalytic validity.

Triangulation: Researchers are expected to use as many different methods as possible to collect information. Working from as many locations as possible, they need to cross-check and verify the information they record. In this research project, the trustworthiness of our data was verified in many different ways. We had twelve different research sites with twenty-four different women involved in collecting information and reflecting on it first with their research partners and then with other women at the national workshops. We included both structured interviews and unstructured discussions with the two coordinating researchers. At the second and third workshops we planned simultaneous activities — sometimes with the same agenda, sometimes with different agendas — to see if women would come to similar conclusions. They did, as is demonstrated in some detail later in this book.

Systematized reflexivity: Researchers are expected to build in systematic ways to reflect on and critically question their own practices during the research. The research design should ensure that they are not imposing their own interpretations when they develop categories or analyses. Lather interprets many researchers' desire to have complete consensus as a "lust for authoritative accounts." (p. 85) Authoritative accounts carry the weight of traditional expertise and are neither diverse nor contradictory. For example, authoritative accounts have been used for centuries to erase women's experience whenever it contradicts or adds nongeneralizable complexity to a standard (white, heterosexual, educated) male experience. To counteract this desire to generalize past the point of erasure, researchers must "construct research designs that demand a vigorous self-reflexivity" (p. 66).

Lather suggests several very useful questions which can help researchers question their own practice, to restrain our desire for non-complex authoritative accounts. For example,

- Did I impose order and structure, or did I encourage ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity?
- What has been muted, repressed, or unheard? Did I silence the resistant voices?
- Have I turned my own voice into an authority in my text?

In our research, ongoing feedback from all the women involved ensured that we recognized and recorded diverse voices. Through the collaborative analysis and recommendation process, women raised their particular concerns. At times, some women felt the workshop agendas and documentation process included too much opportunity for input and discussion. Occasionally, some women expressed concern that the coordinating researchers' unwillingness to move forward without everyone's input wasted precious time or resulted in watered down documentation.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent: All the women who participated as contact women for their programs received complete written and verbal information about the exploratory research that led up to the project proposal, the structure of the sponsoring organization, the methodological framework for the research design, and some anticipated effects of the research (including the expectation that women would experience personal, professional, and political change). At each step of the research, they were consulted about the process.

At the program level, the contact women agreed to inform everyone involved in their woman-positive activity that they were participating in the research. The coordinating researchers facilitated that process until those involved did understand the extent to which the research would involve them or their work.

All the contact women signed consent forms approving the publication of materials that they had written, or that included edited quotes from their interviews or journals, or materials that referred to their participation in the national workshops.

Confidentiality: All conversations and writing between contact women and the coordinating researchers were confidential. Women had the opportunity to read the transcripts of their taped interviews and change, add, or delete information. Women approved all the journals that were edited for distribution.

All women had the opportunity to read and comment on any project documentation that contained information about them. They had the option of having their names and/or identifying information removed from material. They had the option of using a pseudonym.

All women agreed that published information could be used by anyone, but private or group discussions would not be used in a way that women could be identified unless previous agreement had been obtained. Tapes were stored at the home of the coordinating researchers until the project ended, at which time they were erased.

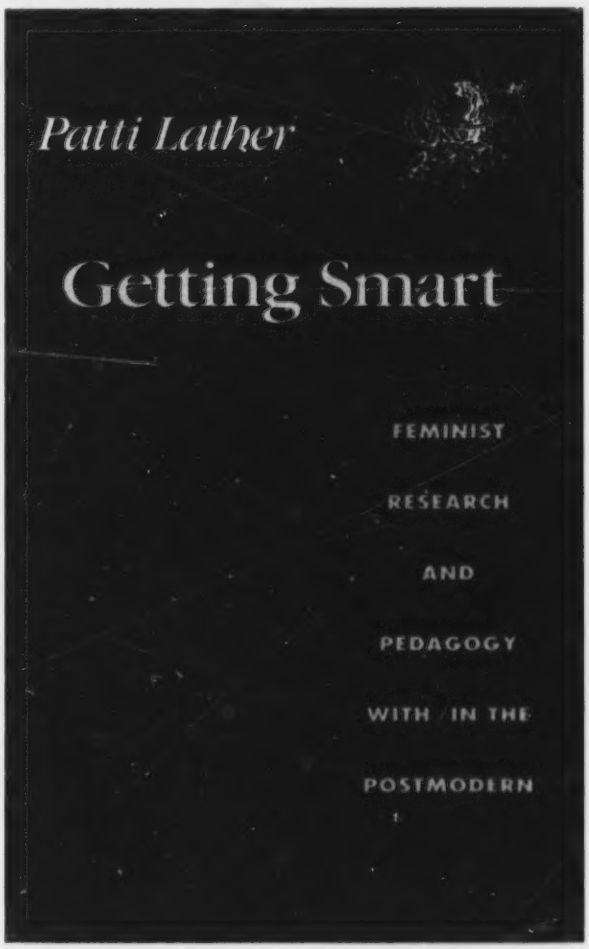
Right to stop the tape recorder or transcription: Women had the right to stop the tape recorder at any point during the two interviews. They had the right to ask that particular material on the tapes not be transcribed. They had the right to put limits on the use of material contained within the transcripts.

Ethical considerations continued on next left hand page

Overall, however, women seemed able to counteract anyone's tendency to speak authoritatively for the group. They raised both their own concerns and concerns they had for those who might not have been present physically but who should not be excluded from the work.

Face validity: Researchers are expected to get extensive feedback from research participants regarding descriptions, analyses, and conclusions developed by themselves or by others. True reciprocity, Lather believes, requires theory building between the subjects and the researcher rather than theory imposition by the researcher alone. The researcher must feed all observations back to all the participants so that they have the opportunity to interpret and analyze their own experience, including the contradictions within that experience.

During this research, women gave continuous feedback on the research process, workshop designs, written material, and final documentation. They most often created the documentation in the first place. The coordinating researchers would then give feedback, they would give feedback on the feedback, and so on. To the best of our ability, we excluded no one's expressed opinion. Instead, we tried to incorporate everyone's perspective throughout the process. Every piece of documentation that included mention of particular women's experience was approved by them, both individually and collectively. They had an opportunity at all times to add in or modify their own reflection and analysis of their work.



Catalytic validity: Researchers are required to work in such a way that "the research process re-orients, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it." (Lather, 1991, p. 68) In this project, the opportunities for individual, paired, and group reflection, interpretation, and analysis instigated individual and collective changes in women's awareness and practice. They valued this opportunity to work with other women literacy workers from across the country, to share ideas, to give and receive support, and to strategize about ways of doing things differently. They experienced personal growth and professional development, they worked with other women in groups to develop political action, and several programs adopted structural change.

Ethical considerations continued. . . .

Right to withdraw or negotiate participation: Women had the right to withdraw from the research at any point or to negotiate how their participation might continue.

Feedback process: Throughout the research, women received public material produced by others before the third workshop so that they could provide feedback. We agreed that no woman would be required to change her interpretation of an event because another woman involved in that event had a different interpretation. However, any and all differing interpretations would be included in the body of the text.

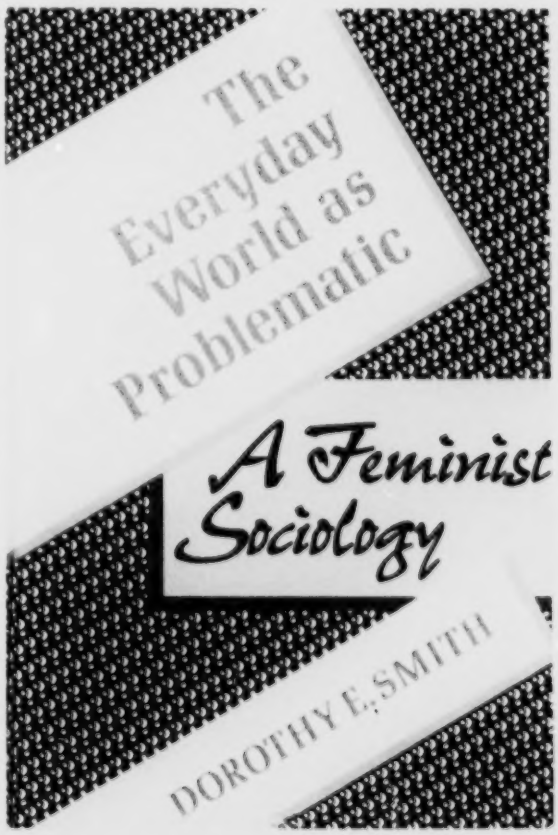
Participating in pairs: A research design that facilitates women participating in partnership with another woman of their choice provides support for both women when the increased awareness and insight initiated by reflection and analysis results in changes that may be disruptive as well as rewarding. It provides support for issues and concerns that may need to be addressed around the research process or the content of the interviews, workshops, or documentation. It also increases the possibilities for movement into collective action or structural change on a political and/or program level.

1-4 Methodological framework

Most people understand research as something that one group of people (the researchers) do to another group of people (the research subjects). Following an already developed plan, the researchers would observe, ask questions, measure, make notes. Their position — or standpoint — should be singular, neutral, and value free. Using scientific methods, they should try to be as objective as possible, not letting opinions or prejudices interfere with what they saw, heard, measured, or recorded. The relationship between the researchers and the research subjects should be tightly controlled. The researchers should try to keep all parts of themselves — their personal, professional, or political selves — outside of the research situation in order not to contaminate it.

Evelyn Jacobs (1988) summarizes traditional research in this way.

> In a traditional research study the research design is usually formulated tightly in advance of data collection. Data might be collected through some form of systematic sampling, using predetermined coding categories, and then analyzed quantitatively. Researchers' personal knowledge of subject aspects of human life would be regarded as irrelevant. (p. 37)



This traditional understanding of research comes from a particular perspective, often called Cartesian. It contrasts sharply with what many call a critical or a feminist perspective. From this second perspective, no one can act in a way that is neutral and value free because everyone is a product of their particular experiences. Those experiences come from who we are. They come from where, when, and how we live our lives. They come from our social and historical context.

Engaging in research from a feminist perspective means that we do not intentionally draw distinct boundaries between those who are doing the research and those who are being researched. While we acknowledge that each person has a different relationship to the work being done, those relationships do not necessarily lead to distance and separation. Similarly, we understand that each one of us enters into research as more than a rational, independent being. Instead, we recognize how we are all embedded in our historical location, that we are all socially organized by such things as class, race, gender, age, sexuality, abilities, citizenship status. (Jagger & Bordo, 1989, p. 3; Stanley, 1990, p. 38)

In other words, both the researchers and the subjects have particular epistemologies — particular ways of knowing things. Some of that knowledge comes out of experience. Some of it comes out of access to different kinds of information. Some of it comes out of affiliation with particular groups or organizations. What is important in feminist research is that we recognize some central principles. For Liz Stanley (1990) those principles include several important considerations:

- There is a social relationship between the researcher and the subjects that operates on many levels.
- Emotion is an important component of the research experience.
- The researcher's intellectual autobiography, the books she has read and the theories she subscribes to, will affect the research process.
- The researcher and the subjects will have different realities and understandings of the same situations.
- The research process and the final production of documents will be influenced by the different kinds of power held by each of the participants.

If we agree that the creation of knowledge is influenced by these different conditions, then we need a research design that begins from the position of women located in their everyday lives, a position of women "actively constructing, as well as interpreting, the social processes and social relations which constitute their everyday realities." (Stanley, 1990, p. 34)

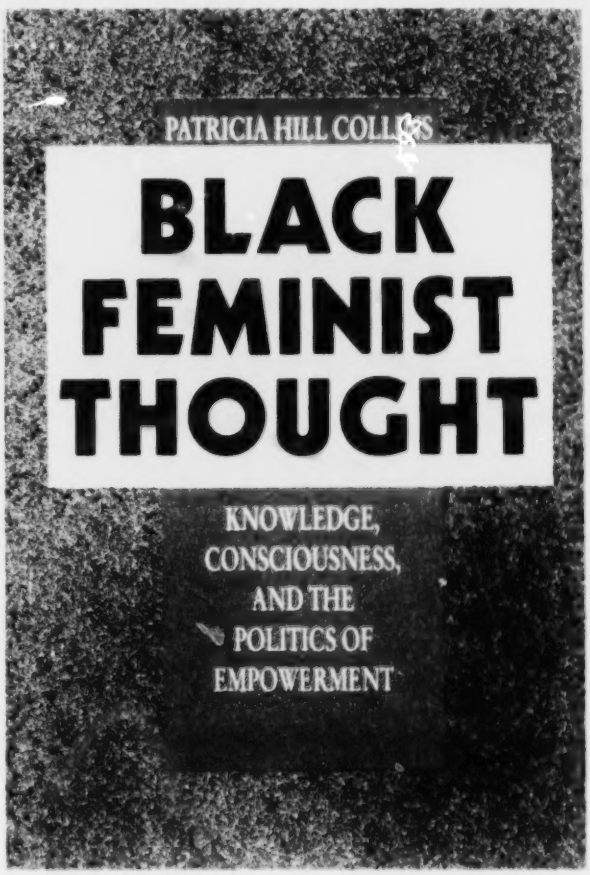
There is a twenty-five year history of sociological research that begins with people's everyday lives. It has a theoretical base, beginning in 1967 with the concept of "grounded theory." Two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, wrote about research as a way of generating theory rather than as a way of testing theory. Instead of having a hypothesis and research design rigidly in place before collecting data, the researchers would go into the research setting without preconceived ideas about what might happen. Immersing themselves in the ordinary events of the setting, the participant observers would work with the research subjects to explore tensions between their experience and the researchers' analysis of what was happening.

Fifteen years after Glaser and Strauss developed their concept of grounded theory, Robert Owens (1982) outlined some of the major differences that had developed between what he called the rationalistic and naturalistic paradigms. Central to these was the qualitative-phenomenological hypothesis which states that we have to know how people in a research situation interpret their own experience — how they use not only their thoughts, but their feelings, values, perceptions, and actions — to understand what is happening with them. If we enter into a research setting without having the perspective of those who live there, then we will not gain knowledge that is of any real use.

Researchers using this hypothesis become very careful about making generalizations from what they discover in a single context. They do not assume that a conclusion based on the behaviour of particular people in a particular location at a particular time can necessarily be applied to the same behaviour by another population in another location at another time. They try to have as many different research sites and different ways of collecting data as possible. They are committed to looking for multiple realities, causes, and truths.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990), a feminist philosopher, has written very strongly about researchers' need to be clear about what they can discover in each location they study. If, for example, researchers are white men who have completed a research study involving other white men, they cannot claim to have learned anything about Black women. Similarly, researchers who are white women working with First Nations women cannot claim that they speak for everyone. It is a form of colonization, of imperialism, to make generalizations from our own interpretation or from information we gain from a particular situation. Rather than accepting the traditional view that research is reliable and credible only when such generalizations can be made, Collins suggests that claims of universality should result in a loss of credibility.

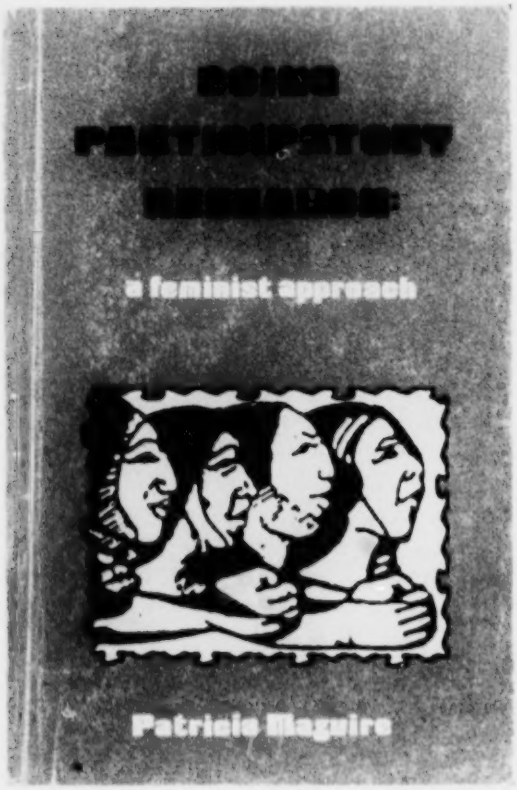
The mainstream qualitative research that emerged from grounded theory and the naturalistic approach closed the distance between researchers and research subjects. Researchers began to value the perspective of subjects, or participants, inviting them to join in the collection of data. The process became more interactive and, rather than using traditional theories to analyze the subjects' experiences, the research documentation most often remained descriptive. (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 11) Researchers distanced themselves from their own theoretical and experiential backgrounds, refusing to put any kind of framework around the descriptions they developed using the subjects' words as data.



Within the last ten years there have been significant developments in qualitative work, extending the research beyond description to analysis, action, and change. Ethnographic and alternate paradigm research have given researchers tools to increase the involvement both of themselves and of their subjects. They work collectively not only to collect data, but also to plan, implement, analyze, and document the project.

In conventional ethnographic work, researchers most often spend time as participant observers in the everyday lives of the research subjects. But, they do not leave their own perspectives behind. They acknowledge their personal, professional, and political positions as they align themselves with a particular population. Beginning as much as possible from the perspective and experiences of these subjects, researchers then use their own theoretical, practical, and research positions to uncover the social, political, and economic structures that influence the research subjects' lives. (Smith 1986, p. 12) This is not necessarily a collaborative process. While the subjects may be given the opportunity to respond to the researchers' interpretation of their situation, they may not be involved in its development. Instead, it is assumed that the researchers will add a layer of analysis based on knowledge they have of what happens outside the research situation.

Alternate paradigm work, as described by Patricia Maguire (1987) does include more active participation of the subjects throughout the research process. In contrast to the ethnographic model, researchers within this paradigm work more collaboratively with participants, giving them a measure of control over the research plan, process, and product. The research subjects participate not only in the collection of data, but also in the analysis of that data and the development of solutions. In this way, researchers are unable to "rewrite the other's world or impose upon it a conceptual framework." (Smith, 1981, p. 8)



Maguire outlines two alternative paradigm methodologies: interpretive research and critical research. Interpretive research is often used to increase understanding between groups of people who have different access to power and to authority. It focuses on how people's different experiences lead to different interpretations of reality. The ways in which individuals think, feel, and act arise from these interpretations and, if they cannot learn more about each other's perspectives, they will not be able to move forward without confrontation.

Critical research, on the other hand, does not necessarily work towards understanding others' perspectives. Instead, it focuses on what individuals do within their own context, how they develop understandings of their own situation. As Maguire (1987) says, it is "used to help people see themselves and social situations in a new way" (p. 14) so they can change how they are doing things or work to get free from social systems that stop them from getting what they need. It is based on an action/reflection model where the theory that is developed comes directly out of the action taken within the research.

This research project probably fits most comfortably into Maguire's critical model. At the same

time, Patti Lather's (1991) outline of postmodern research and pedagogy also had significant influence on the design. Her definition of feminist research, like those of Liz Stanley and Dorothy Smith, clearly supports the way the process developed —

> the overt ideological goal of feminist research in the human sciences is to correct both the invisibility and the distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position. (p. 71)

The descriptions of the programs, their communities, and woman-positive activities can be found in this book, Chapter 6.

You might find it useful to read them at the same time as you read about the research process.

2

Description/Reflection/ Action/Reflection

2-1 The project beginnings

CCLOW received initial funding from the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) in January 1991. The tasks for the three months remaining in the fiscal year included hiring and providing a contract for the researcher, confirming an advisory committee, developing public information on phase one and phase two, and beginning outreach to programs. CCLOW indicated that I would be hired as researcher for phase two. It invited the current members of the advisory committee to continue. All but one agreed and one new member, Jenny Horsman, joined the group.

In February, I met in Toronto with six advisory committee members and two CCLOW staff. We talked about a wide variety of issues, including the development of publicity and outreach materials suitable for program use, ways of understanding the participatory/action research process, the role of advisory committee members, and the possibility of adding a second coordinating researcher. We raised questions about the final product, the relationship between feminist/woman-positive, and whether there was a feminist agenda for the research.

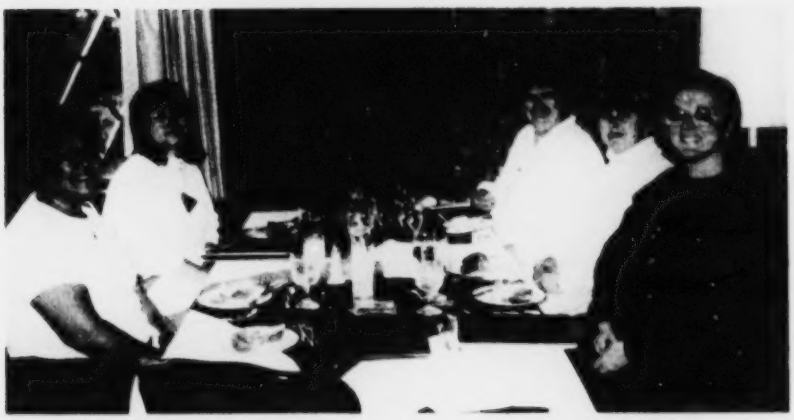
We looked at the possible implications of piecemeal funding. Would we, for example, be required to stop the long-term process at different points — either to produce something that would justify the next period of funding or to wait until the next cheque came in? Given the scale of this project, there could be funding delays because CCLOW had to re-apply each fiscal year, then wait for a cheque. As it happened, after each national workshop the coordinating researchers discussed with CCLOW what aspects of the work had to be completed immediately and what could wait until we had money in the bank.

We also wanted to clarify our audience for this second phase. We decided that both women literacy workers and women literacy students would benefit from the programs' woman-positive activities and from the national advocacy work that CCLOW would undertake following the project. We recognized that the paid time to discuss, reflect on, and document the activity would, in most cases, be a direct

benefit for workers and an indirect benefit for students. In some programs, however, students might participate as contact women.

Given the pivotal role of women program workers in the project, we identified some concerns around their participation. Was it realistic to assume that they would be given release time to do this work? How could we be sure they were not taking on the project as an extra load? How could we be aware of possible consequences for women staff in terms of their job security? How could we develop clear, straightforward contracts with the programs?

Again, as it happened, each program and set of contact women managed their time and relationship with their program differently. Reflecting the nature of adult literacy programing in Canada, many women's paid work was part-time. They used the research time as extra income. For a few women, the research activity — including reflection and writing — became part of their job in the program. A significant number of women had to find time during evenings, weekends, and holidays to document their work.



Some of the women who produced the tape for the outreach kit met for dinner in Duncan, BC. From the left: Doris Dick, Yuen Jang, Evelyn Battell, Kate Nonesuch, Sharon Tillie, Betty-Ann Lloyd. Raja Rashead took the photograph.

After this meeting, two advisory committee members, Evelyn Battell and Jenny Horsman, worked with me to develop materials that could be used by programs interested in the research. A student and two staff members from one of the programs that participated in the exploratory phase had expressed concern that Discovering the strength of our voices was written in a way that excluded most students from reading it. We wanted to ensure that our outreach materials were more accessible. We began with a press release for students working at a basic or intermediate level. We then wrote an account of the research that could be recorded on tape. Evelyn took this transcript back to Duncan where students and staff at Malaspina College produced the tape.

The four programs that participated in phase one received the kit containing the tape, transcript, phase one report, and press releases. We also sent this kit to all the programs that expressed interest in phase two, as well as to a few libraries, resource centres, and programs that requested the complete package.

After the February meeting in Toronto, we waited for word on the project funding. Kate Nonesuch had joined the advisory committee after agreeing to facilitate the first national workshop with Jenny Horsman. In June, the three of us met with Evelyn Battell in Salt Spring Island to plan our next steps. After exploring several alternatives and talking with CCLOW staff and other advisory committee

members, we decided to continue almost as if the project had full funding. We would cut back on the amount of outreach and negotiation with programs prior to the first national workshop and we would limit the number of women attending the first national workshop.

We also developed guidelines for outreach and program selection at this meeting. The four programs that participated in phase one had first priority for phase two. Our second priority was regional representation. Finally, we considered representation through other distinguishing program characteristics. Each program outlines the way in which it came into the project as part of the program descriptions, Chapter 6 of this book.

By early October, fourteen programs had applied to participate. We had a mix of rural and urban, northern and southern programs. We also had a wide variety of program models: community-based and community college programs; a public housing, prison, and union program; a Friendship Centre; a program that worked with urban immigrant women primarily from the Caribbean, a northern program that worked with Inuit women, and a program that worked with Aboriginal women.

Women who participated as students in these programs ranged from those involved in basic literacy work to those preparing to write grade 12 equivalency exams. Some of the programs already included women-only groups in their structure. Other programs had never before considered working with women as a particular student group. Every woman who expressed interest either had a very clear picture of what she wanted to do or was able to imagine several possibilities.

At a teleconference meeting of advisory committee members and CCLOW staff in October, we chose twelve programs to participate in the project.

2-2 Preparation for the first workshop

In the month before the first national workshop, I continued to discuss the project with the program women who would be most involved in planning the woman-positive activity. As we talked, we developed a profile of each program, including possible woman-positive activities for each site. At the same time, we developed a shared vocabulary and tone for discussion — something that changed with each woman, but also developed a certain commonality from program to program. We were excited, respectful, eager, confused, tentative, flexible, and curious — very curious.

Ideally, I should have been able to set up a series of calls with each program, involving progressively more program people in the development of different ideas for each activity. I should have been involved in some of the discussions between staff and students, staff and administration. I should have been able to ask some difficult questions about how they might deal with some of the consequences of the activity.

Ideally, I should also have been able to work with advisory committee members, giving them information about the programs, the women, and the ways in which we talked about CCLOW as a feminist organization sponsoring program-based research about woman-positive literacy activities. As it happened, funding uncertainties and our desire to have at least one national workshop resulted in unfinished conversations about participatory action research, feminist agendas, the role of advisory committee members, and the term "woman-positive."

Aisla Thomson, Executive Director of CCLOW, says that the organization's experience with working relationships between volunteers and paid researchers had always followed a traditional model and, unfortunately, they did not attempt to explore the boundaries of a participatory research process with this project. "Upon reflection," Aisla says, "perhaps a more integrative approach to the direction of the research in phase two, with everyone involved acting in a participatory role should have been adopted." The question, "What is the role of an advisory committee in a participatory research process?" may be one for future debates and research.

In October, CCLOW received a cheque from the National Literacy Secretariat that would support the project's work during this fiscal year. Two women from each program could now attend the first workshop, just four weeks away. CCLOW's Dianne Palachik had looked after the logistics, booking a retreat centre outside Winnipeg. Jenny, Kate, and I had begun to talk about possible agenda items during the Salt Spring planning meeting in June. We developed these ideas further during a teleconference call in October. In the week before the workshop, we met for two days to set the agenda and design a process.

Our goals for the workshop included: understanding this project as a piece of action research; discussing possible woman-positive activities; anticipating how these activities might unfold; and building a sense of trust and community. We also wanted to become more aware of ourselves as women, as gendered people, and we wanted to explore what such an awareness might mean for our work. In many ways, these goals described the entire eighteen-month research process — and we planned to accomplish, or at least introduce, them during our first four days together.

2-3 The first workshop

As the thirty women attending this workshop began to arrive at St. Benedict's retreat centre outside Winnipeg, one of the meeting rooms filled up with photographs, posters, pamphlets, and writing from the different programs. We set up tables for favourite learning materials and teaching guides. A tape recorder played music that women had brought. Slowly, we began to meet each other and talk. Most did not know anyone aside from the other woman representing their program — and sometimes, these two women did not know each other very well. In a few cases, women met old friends and renewed acquaintances.

The formal agenda started Thursday afternoon as the facilitators asked us to explore some of our differences and commonalities as a way of getting to know each other. They focused on possible areas of sensitivity and tried to make visible the different concerns women might have at the beginning of such a project.

Many women drew back from this process. We were a diverse group of women with varying degrees of experience with women-only conferences and workshops — from none at all to decades of working in local, regional, and national women's organizations. Some of us had never been away from families, friends, and communities before. Most, no matter what our past experience, wanted some time and space to get used to the setting and find out who we all were before we began to imagine how we might work together.

In retrospect, of course, that seems perfectly clear. As the workshop evaluations and later discussions indicated, most of the women who attended the first workshop wanted to go through a process of description before moving into reflection or analysis. They wanted to talk about their work and their lives in their communities before applying labels to themselves or their experience.

This became especially clear during an activity where we indicated on a continuum how comfortable or uncomfortable we felt identifying ourselves or our work as feminist. Although CCLOW is a feminist organization, neither the programs nor the women involved in this research were expected to identify as feminist. Some did, some didn't. Some thought it shouldn't make any difference, that it wasn't really important. Others thought it was central and might make all the difference in the world.

Most important, perhaps, we didn't really know each other well enough to understand what "feminist" might mean in this context. And it was time for bed. On top of everything else, many women felt exhausted from long hours of travel and jet lag. The next morning, we would begin again.

Most women brought photos, brochures, and publications from their program.

LaVera Schiele and Mary Anne Ellul look over the many learning materials women brought to display.

Women who attended the first national workshop

Aisla Thomson and Dianne Palachik
CCLOW, Toronto, ON
Betty-Ann Lloyd
Co-ordinating Researcher, Halifax, NS
Kate Nonesuch
Workshop facilitator, Advisory Committee, and Malaspina College, Duncan, BC
Jenny Horsman
Workshop facilitator and Advisory Committee, Toronto, ON
Evelyn Battell
Advisory Committee, Duncan, BC
Frances Ennis
Advisory Committee and Rabbittown Learners Program, St. John's, NF
Michele Kuhlmann
Advisory Committee, Toronto, ON
Karen Bergman-Illnik and Selma Karetak
Arctic College, Arviat, NWT
Shirley Hickey
Rabbittown Learners Program, St. John's, NF
Mary Snow and Donna Lynn McNulty
Saint John Learning Exchange, Saint John, NB
Tannis Atkinson and Amele Zewge
Toronto ALFA Centre, Toronto, ON
Mary Anne Ellul and Robin Silverman Allcorn
Beat the Street, Toronto, ON
Monique Beaulieu and Anne Moore
Action Read, Guelph, ON
Diane Eastman and Gail Lanoie
Brandon Friendship Centre, Brandon, MB
Debbie Heagy and Nicole Jessop
WEST, Saskatoon, SK
Eileen Gorman and LaVera Schiele
Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Prince Albert, SK
Jeanne MacIntyre and Nora Flett
Keyano College, Fort McMurray, AB
Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney
College of New Caledonia, Prince George, BC
Vicki Noonan
Malaspina College, Duncan, BC

Friday, women worked in small groups, trying to make sense of discussion questions and getting to know each other in the process. As members of the planning group and advisory committee moved through the different rooms, we realized that women wanted more information about program-based research, the project, and what we expected them to do after the workshop. We met during an afternoon break in the agenda to completely replan the process.

For some of the planning group members, the changes meant we were taking out sections with overt feminist content and replacing them with more neutral topics, such as "This is what the project is about. This is what you are expected to do." For other members of the planning group, the changes meant we were giving women a context for their participation in this project, an opportunity to meet in affinity groups where they could explore their past experiences and future plans in ways that felt comfortable for them.

That evening, following a description of action research in general and this research in particular, women became more comfortable about the project and their place in it. We concentrated on the different tasks they would accomplish over the next eighteen months, dividing the work into three six-month sections. Each of these sections had a defining activity: reflection, documentation, and analysis. We spent time talking about what each of these might look like in different programs, in different parts of the country. Women raised many different issues, including questions about confidentiality, measures of success, how much support they would have, and how we would continue to communicate.

Saturday morning, women met in four affinity groups, each one made up of contact women from three different programs. During our replanning the day before, we had organized these groups according to the different kinds of programs women worked with, what they planned to do in terms of a woman-positive activity, what issues they identified, and how they talked about their politics. During the day, each group moved through three different sessions. They talked about their possible woman-positive activities with Frances Ennis and me. They considered goals and objectives for their activities with Kate Nonesuch. They discussed different research techniques with Jenny Horsman.

Finally, on Sunday, women learned about the reflective writing process and how they might use it to document their activities. We then used that technique to explore our experience at the workshop. By the time we met for a final round, we had come a long way. Women talked now as acquaintances, even friends, who had discovered a great deal about other

Paula Davies, Nora Flett, Mary Ann Tierney, and Jeanne MacIntyre.

Betty-Ann Lloyd and Frances Ennis take a break.

programs, other women, the research project, and themselves. There was laughter and quiet conversation as we took down program displays, gathered books and music, and talked about the next time we would meet.

In their evaluations and reflections, some women talked about the first day's confusion as a positive experience.

> At the beginning, there was some confusion but as I look back I am glad there was. The confusion was felt by everyone and brought us closer together.

Others suggested, both in anger and in sorrow, that we had missed an important opportunity to confront and perhaps resolve differences around feminist/woman-positive. Still others talked about their surprise and concern that some women seemed to expect, even encourage, confrontation or conflict. These women said they felt most comfortable in their affinity groups where others affirmed the respect and trust they felt within their programs.

> My experiences here have reaffirmed for me the value and strength of our own program philosophy. I've come to appreciate how our philosophy of individuality, egalitarian focus, and positive support networking has engendered a natural flow of both female- and male-positive activities and atmosphere as part of natural process.

One woman talked about how the tension around the issue of feminism seemed part of a pattern.

> The old wall was present for me . . . where labels of "feminism" suddenly created a chasm of silence over which I can build bridges with those I know, but with strangers I get frightened and feel unsafe. Who is more frightened, us or them? . . . I would love to do some work at that level of making "feminism" feel safe for more women and less threatening. I felt disliked by some because of this issue.

Another woman wondered how others might experience those walls — and whether the walls are necessary at all.

> I <u>do</u> wonder whether the women who don't call themselves feminists felt separate, other . . . and I wonder if they needed to, since many women act and think in what many call feminist ways without feeling comfortable with that label.

One woman articulated a strong feeling of separateness.

> I felt very uncomfortable and sometimes felt like I had to give a reason for

> why I felt the way I did. I was mostly quiet in meetings . . . Finding those who think the same as me, of course I buddied up with them. Those who think differently, I observed and learned about them. I could not get used to this issue of men being brought up all the time as to blame for a woman not being able to learn.

Yet another woman who had never before attended a women-only event, expressed her delight at the new experience. "I felt very comfortable and relaxed at all times." Like several other women, she considered the discussion of feminism a momentary awkwardness that did not affect the rest of her experience at the workshop.

If we needed any reminders about the challenges faced when bringing together women who are strangers to each other, who have different assumptions, different expectations, different experiences, we were set straight by totally opposite reactions to the setting.

> the food was wonderful/the food was not good for me at all
> the space was warm and inviting/the space was cold and alienating

In the end, we came together as a group of women who worked across the country in literacy programs with many different mandates and philosophical perspectives. We came together with a common interest: to find out what happens when we plan, implement, and document woman-positive activities in literacy programs. Although our personal, professional, and political lives were clearly very diverse, most of us expressed our optimism and curiosity about the next 12 months.

Back row: Gail Lanoie, Donna Lynn McNulty, Karen Bergman-Illnik, Nicole Jessop, Mary Snow, Debbie Heagy, Robin Silverman Allcorn, Kate Nonesuch, Jenny Horsman, Evelyn Battell, Michele Kuhlmann. Middle row: Mary Ann Tierney, Paula Davies, Diane Eastman, Mary Anne Ellul, Anne Moore, Vicki Noonan, LaVera Schiele. Front row: Monique Beaulieu, Frances Ennis, Shirley Hickey, Amele Zewge, Tannis Atkinson, Betty-Ann Lloyd, Selma Karetak.

When I watched all these women get together and share their concerns, their programs, their plans, I felt very glad to be part of such a large network. I think I now have a few new colleagues with whom I can share ideas and support. I never had that before, except at my own workplace.

2-3 The first visit

Following the first workshop it became clear that not only did all twelve programs want to continue with the project, but they also believed the entire group should stay together for a full twelve months. Those women continuing in the process wanted a sense of connection, of returning to each other in April, and again the next November. While women's enthusiasm and growing sense of group process was gratifying, I wondered about the strain on the budget and on myself as coordinator. Instead of working with eight to ten programs, half of them involved for six months and half for twelve months as originally planned, there were twelve programs committed for a full year.

Frances Ennis, an original member of the advisory committee, agreed to share the coordination of the research. She would work with Rabbittown, Beat the Street, and Toronto ALFA Centre, co-facilitate the remaining workshops, and be involved in the documentation for the project. CCLOW decided that we could work with the budget figures to accommodate the extra involvement because of earlier cutbacks in outreach and program preparation for the first workshop.

In January, Frances worked with Rabbittown in St. John's and travelled to Toronto to visit the two programs there, while I flew to Saskatoon, Prince Albert, and Guelph. I made a second trip in February, visiting Saint John and Brandon, and meeting with Karen Bergman-Illnik (Arctic College) in Winnipeg. My third trip took place in March, when I visited Fort McMurray, Prince George, and Duncan.

When Betty-Ann Lloyd visited Action Read in Guelph she met with the women's group. From left, Shirley, Anne, Joanne, Monique, Lucy. Photograph from Women: Where have we been? Where are we going?

At each program, Frances and I would spend from four to eight hours talking with the two contact women about their

community, their program, and their woman-positive activity. We often talked about the first workshop and lingering confusions, frustrations, or concerns. We also had a list of questions to review at each site. We asked about what had happened around the research so far, how students and staff had responded to the woman-positive activity, and how the contact women were able to document those responses. We explored what they were uncovering about their own responses.

We wondered how women fit the woman-positive activity and half day of research in with the rest of their lives. We wanted to know how their involvement had affected their personal, professional, and political lives. We often took part in the activity while we were there, getting to know students and administrators, observing the activity in its particular context. Finally, we worked on drafting a description of each community, program, and activity so we would have a "public" version of what was happening in this research.

When Frances Ennis visited the Toronto ALFA Centre in Toronto she met with some members of the women's group. Front, Moisley. Back from left, Christeen, Amele, Davie.

2-4 The first interview

During this first visit, Frances and I taped an interview with each contact woman. We asked how she remembered finding out about the project and what she thought we wanted to do. We asked how she understood the idea of "woman-positive" at the beginning of the project and if that understanding had shifted. We discussed what had happened so far that she would describe as positive and what had happened that she would describe as less positive. Following up on some of the discussion at the first workshop, we asked how women would describe the relationship between woman-positive and feminist, and whether their involvement, or their program's involvement, would have been different if CCLOW had used the term "feminist" rather than "woman-positive."

We usually taped the interview at the end of a two-day visit. We used the interviews to discuss any leftover questions from the first workshop and to lead women into reflection on the response of others in their programs. Each woman received a copy of the transcript from her interview. She was invited to change anything she felt was confusing, to add thoughts that she had had since the visit, or to ask that information be masked or deleted. After these responses were integrated into the transcripts, they became part of our data.

- **What did you first think CCLOW wanted to do during this research? Why did you want to become involved?**

During the first interview, women often laughed when they looked back at their first understandings of the project. They realized how much their interpretation had shifted during the first several months and how they would probably continue to change throughout the research.

Those who had had some contact with CCLOW in the past believed we would gather information that would improve women's access to and experience of literacy education. They expected the research to have a feminist orientation and to pay close attention to women's stories, women's voices. For others, a combination of curiosity, trust, and desire to talk about women's experiences got them as far as the first workshop in Winnipeg. After that, they had to decide if they should continue.

> We thought you were a bunch of feminists getting on the bandwagon. (Laughter) Someone in the group said, "Are they really serious about this or are they just jumping on the bandwagon?" I said, "No, I don't think so, I think they're serious about what they're doing. I think they're trying to get all this information from women across Canada and do some good with it." The government has to realize something has got to happen for women — more than what's happening now. (Shirley Hickey, Rabbittown Learners Program)

Many women became involved out of a sense of isolation in their own work. They wanted to become connected to other women fighting the same kinds of battles they faced everyday. For a significant number of women, the process of meeting and talking with other women about their work became more and more important. Content began to take a back seat to process and, sometimes, a professional interest in contributing to literacy education became a personal and political interest in what they might gain from working with other women. Nancy Steel (Keyano College) first described how she understood the project.

> I thought at the time that you were interested in looking at the kinds of literacy activities that women were interested in doing and some of the content that might come out of those literacy activities, some general observations that we can make about things that women want to do in terms of having a voice.

When she read the transcript a month or so later, she added this further reflection.

> I think that from a personal perspective (as opposed to a strictly professional one) this was about <u>me</u> finding my voice, too. I am in transition from a traditional role — at-home mum — to a less traditional role — instructor and consultant. I've faced opposition. The prospect of working with other women who were also in transition offered comfort, support, and affirmation. In many ways, I went in needing their ideas every bit as much as they needed mine. This personal motivation complemented the professional motivation.

• What has happened for you so far that is positive or less positive?

Frances and I asked women if they felt anything positive had happened to them or to their program because of the research. Even though many women had just started their activities, they gave us a long list of incidents, ideas, and feelings that they felt were already a direct consequence of their involvement in the project. Even women who had encountered significant resistance emphasized that they felt the process itself had been very interesting and, in some cases, "a learning experience!"

Many women experienced an ongoing sense of connection to other women across the country. For some, it was almost like carrying on conversations.

> I often think of the Rabbittown project and Arviat — the women that I talked to a lot. I wonder what they're doing. And I think, "Oh, well, they could do this, they could do that." This goes through my head. (Eileen Gorman, Pine Grove Correctional Centre)

For other women, the project provided a reassurance that they were not isolated with the problems they faced.

> I think the most positive thing has been to know that we're not the only women trying to figure out how to discuss these potentially explosive issues — and that nobody has the answers. I keep thinking there must be some resource somewhere that will tell me how I talk to a group of men who think that it's okay for a man to slap his wife around. (Tannis Atkinson, Toronto ALFA Centre)

Tannis also said that participating in the project allowed her to become more honest about who she is, about being lesbian.

> I've been here for six years. Most of the time I haven't been very open about my sexual orientation. And that has to do again with the fear of how people would react because I think if I'm open about who I am then people will think that I hate all men. You know, that whole stereotype. . . . I feel like there have been some ways in which I've been afraid to be honest and now I feel more conviction that maybe that will be a strength for me.

Although few women kept in touch between workshops, they knew that the other women were there. And when they did want to write or talk to someone, they had a small research budget that could cover some of the expense.

Many of the women felt a pressure to carry through on some of their personal, professional, and political ideas. Once they had a structure through which they could experiment and reflect, a forum in which to talk and write, they felt an obligation to become more proactive in their programs. Even with the restricted time and resources of most programs, they interpreted this pressure as positive. And, although at times the thoughts or observations might not be

positive, women felt some relief in actually having the opportunity to name their experience and then do something to change it.

In many of the programs, students became directly involved in the woman-positive activities. This gave women who worked as administrators or coordinators an opportunity to become involved with program participants in a new and refreshing way.

> I feel as if I've made friends with some women on a level that didn't exist before — and that is a very good feeling. Getting away from just assuming that you're doing a good job at helping people, assisting them, enabling them to become more powerful people. But not really knowing them, and not really knowing first-hand enough about the kinds of things they care about and feel. (Marion Wells, Saint John Learning Exchange)

In some programs, women students experienced very immediate and direct positive consequences because of the woman-positive activities in their programs. This was particularly true for women who participated in women-only groups. Simply through the process of pulling the groups together, some women felt they had a stronger presence, a right to ask for support and information about things that related to their experience as women. Students' involvement in the woman-positive activities also had a direct effect on their programs. In one setting, the enthusiasm of the women involved in the CCLOW group constantly spilled over into the regular classroom.

> That's one of the reasons that I like to do it at 10:00 in the morning. They just fire everybody — they keep everybody going for the rest of the day. And they certainly keep themselves going. (Diane Eastman, Brandon Friendship Centre)

In several programs, the two women involved in the research began to work together as a team either in the classroom or in group activities. They talked about their opportunity to learn from each other's teaching and working styles.

> Working with somebody else for me has required slowing down because you have to talk things over and work things out. It's making a bigger space than if I was teaching it on my own. And I think that's been good as a teacher as well as a feminist, as well as on a personal level — just to kind of not spin your wheels but to take a different pace on things. (Paula Davies, College of New Caledonia)

Even women who did not team teach felt themselves working with new ideas, new techniques. Sometimes they believed this happened because they were working outside the usual structure of their program. At other times, it seemed to have more to do with the newness of their situation or the experimental nature of doing research.

And finally, being involved in a national project allowed many women to feel that their work was being validated not only for themselves, but also for their administration or board. It added credibility to some of the issues they wanted to

raise concerning women's experience. Some women felt that their programs would be more open to research and staff development in the future because of their involvement in this project.

Of course, not all the consequences of being involved in this project had been positive. Both passive and active resistance forced a few women to confront the reality of their work from a different perspective.

> In the beginning the students, particularly the male students and sometimes female students, were really angry that we were doing this. They didn't think it was necessary and they thought it was unfair to men for women to actually do something for themselves. Some of that ended up in a bit of violence and a lot of anger and threats. For a while there I felt like all I heard every time I was at the centre was some guy freaking out at me, usually very loudly, about what I was doing. I had a guy come in and scream at me and call me a feminist bitch and a lot of stuff like that. That wasn't so positive. (Robin Silverman Allcorn, Beat the Street)

Even where the men's response was less aggressive, it still raised difficult questions. For some, it was a question of program priorities and focus. For others, it became a struggle to answer that omnipresent question — What about the men?

> One of the men in particular said, "I've been abused, too, and you're talking about abuse. Abuse is not a women's issue. It is an abused person's issue." (Diane Eastman, Brandon Friendship Centre)

Involvement in this woman-positive project raised questions among many women's family and friends who believed the women might be changing in ways that would affect their relationships. At times, these questions centred on the ways in which women might be becoming "feminist" or "liberated." Women not only talked about others confronting them with these questions, they realized they were asking some of the questions themselves. For one woman, the issue became how to reconcile ideas of "woman-positive" and "learner-centred."

> I was trying to strike that balance between asking provocative questions so that we did see and view ourselves as women doing women's issues in writing and literacy, and not creating a framework, where that might be imposed. I wanted to be comfortable with the line that I was walking. And I had to feei that comfort for myself — where I felt, I am learner-centred but I can still ask those provocative questions, and then wait and see if learners want to pursue them or not. (Nancy Steel, Keyano College)

For another, the early months of the project led to serious questioning about her work.

> One of the things that's been happening over the past several weeks — I guess since Christmas time when I finally had enough time to take four days off and do nothing but sleep — I've been seriously thinking of giving up teaching. So that seems to be a fairly negative reaction to the whole process. (Kate Nonesuch, Malaspina College)

The bottom line for many of the women involved was that taking on any new activity means that time has to be taken from something else. Despite all attempts to ensure that women were not simply adding the research to their full-time work, the reality was that many women involved in literacy, particularly community-based literacy, never have the time they want or need to do their work.

• What did you think we meant by "woman-positive" when we first talked with you? What do you think it means now?

Most women said they were not sure what we meant by "woman-positive" when they first came into the research. During initial telephone conversations they learned that one of the research objectives was to discover how different women in different programs defined the concept of woman-positive for themselves. Occasionally, women would ask if there was a correct or incorrect way to be woman-positive. I would usually repeat something I had written in a paper delivered between the two phases.

> While I may not believe that there is one "correct" concept of what it means to be woman-positive, I do believe that there is an "incorrect" way to approach the concept — one that puts itself forward as universal, as crossing boundaries of sex, race, class, abilities, formal education, geographic location, immigration status, employment status, relationship to children, histories of emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual abuse. (Lloyd, 1991b)

My bottom line had been that an activity is woman-positive if it doesn't set out to fix the women involved but, instead, tries to fix the circumstances in which the women find themselves.

Most women assumed that a woman-positive activity would somehow be good for women. It might meet women's needs better than other activities in the program. It might change some aspect of the program that made it difficult for women to attend. It might provide a learning experience designed especially for the women involved.

A significant number of women originally believed that woman-positive meant women-only. Others believed that woman-positive meant the same as feminist. They thought those of us involved in planning the research had chosen something "softer" than the "f" word because we did not want to alienate women who might not identify as feminist.

Several women felt they were already doing work that was positive for women. They wanted to have that work either challenged or affirmed. Like everyone else, they were curious.

By the first interview, two or three months after the first workshop, women had found ways to talk about woman-positive work that made sense in their own context. For example, it became a very active term for Diane Eastman (Brandon Friendship Centre) who was working with women who had been sexually assaulted as children.

> I think being woman-positive is making women feel they have the right to act. That's sort of a base line to start with. And not that we just have rights, but that we have a responsibility too.

Doing woman-positive work here meant taking the responsibility to raise issues that others would prefer to ignore.

Similarly, for Jeanne MacIntyre (Keyano College) doing woman-positive work implied becoming more pro-active by taking the perspective of women in the community and initiating changes. The actions didn't have to be major and they might not work exactly as planned the first time through. However, if we can learn from our mistakes and let others know about our experiences, then we are creating a more positive environment for all students.

Her colleague, Nancy Steel (Keyano College), suggested that "programs that take the lead from women are woman-positive." Women need to be seen as something other than "equal to men," she added. Women deserve to be seen as "women." Other women took up the theme that woman-positive work means seeing things from women's rather than men's perspective. Woman-positive means "dealing with the things the women want rather than things the men want and think we need." (Gail Lanoie, Brandon Friendship Centre)

A few of the women experienced this perspective shift less as a move from men's to women's perspective than as a move from staff to student perspective. At first, Eileen Gorman (Pine Grove Correctional Centre) believed that doing something woman-positive meant helping women by doing something for them.

> Now I see that the thrust should come from the client, that they should be telling us and we should be helping them expand on the activity. But we have to take the lead from them and that's the reverse to what I thought at the start. Now I have to sit and listen and work out what is it they really want.

Some women continued to use the term "woman-positive" much as they might use the term "feminist." Others began to think about woman-positive as a more practical term, one that allowed them to get on with their work. It did not alienate women who might feel biased against feminism and, therefore, allowed more women to participate in the activities.

• How do you think woman-positive and feminist are similar? How do you think they are different?

Several women acknowledged that feminism had been important to their way of thinking and being in the world. At the same time, they felt calling an activity "feminist" would be making it more narrow than calling it "woman-positive." And, most important perhaps, they wanted to have a broadly defined, broadly accessible activity.

> I would hate to think that anything that's feminist would not be

> woman-positive. But I think that some things in the way we understand feminism are exclusive. They are not meant to be, but it doesn't always work all the way around for everybody. (Mary Ann Tierney, College of New Caledonia)

A few women mentioned that they wanted to be very careful about using the word "feminist" because so much theory has come out of the experience of women who are very unlike most of the women in their programs.

> If I were to impose that term on other women I would also be imposing a culture, a class, a race, a time in history — and I would not be able to begin to see where other women are coming from. (Anne Moore, Action Read)

Anne also believes that she can talk about feminism and being feminist because she begins from a privileged position. She says that given what patriarchy itself has done to our thinking about the women's movement and given the current backlash against feminism,

> it's easier for middle class, educated, white women to risk more because they have access to more power and support than do poor women or women of colour. It's much more risky to say you are a feminist than to say something is woman-positive.

Even though many women did not, themselves, make a distinction between woman-positive and feminist activities, they were very conscious that women in their program would see them differently.

> I think that the word feminism scares some women, women who see themselves as more traditional or who feel that they're quite happy in traditional roles. I think the word feminism makes them feel like that's "them," it's not "me." Woman-positive means that it's something for them. (Pat MacNeil, Beat the Street)

For many women, feminism clearly raised the issue of setting up "us" and "them" — feminists and not-feminists; man-haters and not-man-haters; radicals and not-radicals. It also seemed to set up an uncomfortable image of confrontation.

> Feminism, I always see a bit of a warrior stance — the female who is fighting with her back against the wall for her rights and is bloody mad. And that's me to a large extent. But I think there's another kind of empowerment in woman-positive which is this social building, that doesn't necessarily have to concentrate on fighting. It can focus on supporting, relating. (Marion Wells, Saint John Learning Exchange)

When women identified their concerns, or the concerns of others, about feminist activity, they used terms such as "militant," "abrasive," "negative," "against something rather than for something."

When we asked women where this image of feminism came from, almost everyone identified the media as the major problem in terms of putting forward a negative image of feminists and feminism. As Nicole Jessop (WEST) suggested, in

rural areas women often don't have a lot of contact with other women — particularly with other women who might hold different views. In that context, using the word "feminist" brings a very strong reaction.

> If you say it people automatically think that you're some kind of a radical, left-wing woman that wants to change the world so that the women will be always in power.

Mary Snow (Saint John Learning Exchange) said that it's a shame this stigma is attached to feminists because all women need the choices that feminists are fighting for.

> But I think sometimes that word can create fear in people. It did a little bit for me. Woman-positive is something totally different. I don't feel that you have to be a feminist to be woman-positive.

Creating fear or suspicion in others is clearly something that most women in this project actively tried to avoid. Many women talked about the usefulness of the term "woman-positive" in avoiding conflict over negative stereotypes and different meanings associated with the term "feminist."

> I think that not only will you risk being misunderstood, but you risk reactions that you don't want to have. Backlash, resentment, suspicion, mistrust, misunderstanding, and all kinds of things that you don't want. But if you say "woman-positive" it sounds quite clear and non-threatening. (Vicki Noonan, Malaspina College)

Some women felt that using woman-positive was "a gentler way of coming across." (LaVera Schiele, Pine Grove Correctional Centre) It allowed them to be more exploratory because they had no image to measure up to, no preconceived notions of what they should do.

Others felt frustrated that they were constantly asked to compromise their beliefs for fear of alienating someone. Almost always, that frustration was mixed with understanding — particularly in relation to working with women. For example, Paula Davies (College of New Caledonia) admitted that she gets tired of being told that the word "feminist" offends people.

> I am a feminist, and I'm happy to be a feminist, and I'm not saying you have to be, but I don't want to be ashamed of that word.

As Anne Moore (Action Read) put it, she's a pragmatist.

> I'm willing to negotiate the label, especially at the beginning when I'm working with a group. But I'm not willing to compromise the values that feminism implies. I would reassert the label at different times to challenge our thinking.

A few women suggested that they might identify as feminist if they could define it for themselves — and make sure others had the same definition. Others felt that they always defined it for themselves — whether or not they mentioned that definition every time the word is raised.

> I'm okay with being branded, labelled, categorized, whatever, as feminist because I can choose my own definition. I'm okay with that. I can disagree with how others have defined it if I choose to, or just let it go. It depends on the situation. (Wanita Koczka, Pine Grove Correctional Centre)

Perhaps Tannis Atkinson (Toronto ALFA Centre) came closest to many women's free-floating concern about the term "feminism": "The question is: What happens when people use the same word but mean very different things by it?"

A few women said feminism is more a private belief system than a way that they would publicly acknowledge their work. It is a philosophy that women come to believe through their own experiences and their reading. Other women said that, for them, feminism is very much defined by the way in which it is public and actively political.

> I think that saying something is woman-positive takes a political edge off of an activity which might otherwise be called feminist. (Kate Nonesuch, Malaspina College)

Some women talked about this as a difference between liberal reforms — working with existing structures and attitudes — and more radical responses to oppression.

> Woman-positive sounds very liberal, sounds like making an existing program, which is mostly more accessible to men, accessible to women. That would be modifying our programs, accommodating different needs of women so that they can participate in our program.
>
> Feminism on the other hand sounds like more than accommodating women. It is liberating and struggling against any and all types/forms of oppression against women. (Amele Zewge, Toronto ALFA Centre)

- **If CCLOW had said "We want to find out what happens when we do a feminist activity in a literacy program," how would that have made a difference to you or to your program?**

As might be expected from the discussion outlined above, many women felt they would have had some hard decisions to make if CCLOW had used the word "feminist" rather than "woman-positive" in the research question. Some women said they assumed from the beginning that, since CCLOW identifies as a feminist organization, all the women and all the activities would also be identified as feminist. They had to work with their surprise that some women and some activities were beginning from a position that didn't include a feminist interpretation of their work.

A few women said they would not have contacted CCLOW about the research if they had thought they would have to implement feminist activities in their programs. Several women, including women who identified as feminist, said they would have wondered about hidden agendas. Did the organization have

preconceived ideas about what would be considered "good" and "bad," and would the women and programs involved be judged by those standards?

A few women said that if CCLOW described the activities as feminist, they would have assumed that women participating in the research would have to change in particular ways for the activity to be seen as successful. They would not have felt comfortable setting out with a preconceived understanding of how women should behave.

Most women, including some who did not identify as feminist, replied that they would have been equally interested in research that involved activities labeled as "feminist." They would have enjoyed working with other women and they would have been curious about what might happen, both personally and professionally, because of this work.

> I almost think of myself as a feminist in a very, very tiny, tiny, tiny part of my life. So I don't think it would have turned me off. I think I would have come to listen, anyway, and then made up my mind. Because when I talk about CCLOW and talk about doing feminist research, people that know me don't really seem that surprised! (Nicole Jessop, WEST)

Of these women, however, only a few said their programs would have been comfortable with their participation. Most believed that their program administration, staff, and students would have been reluctant to engage in something that was actually labelled "feminist." In contrast, they might be willing to ignore "woman-positive" because it sounds harmless.

A few of the women who would have proceeded despite the anticipated reluctance of their administration or students, said they might not have immediately identified the activity as "feminist." Others said they would have named the activity "feminist," with the consequence that students would have been much less likely to participate. These activities would have focused more on women already interested in feminism and these women, in most cases, would have been staff and volunteers.

Many women said they would not want to face the anger and resentment that an openly feminist activity would elicit from their co-workers, administration, or students. The possible benefits would not have offset the costs, particularly since their primary interest was in actually doing something they felt might benefit the women in the program. They might have had to spend a lot of time doing education around feminism unless they decided to do something completely outside the mainstream of the program or institution. They might have had to begin an entirely new activity, rather than building on existing classes, groups, or activities. As Mary Ann Tierney (College of New Caledonia) said, "All the battles can't be fought together."

Some women pointed out that even working with other women who identify as feminist can lead to a struggle over what "feminist" means in any particular context. In non-feminist groups it becomes that much more difficult. If your agenda is to do woman-positive literacy work, then that requires one strategy. If your

agenda is to make a feminist statement, then that requires another strategy. If your agenda is to find a support group of feminist women, then that is a different strategy again.

By the time we finished the first interview women had had time to think about the first workshop, become involved in their own activity, and anticipate the next time they would be getting together as a group. Some women had been exchanging journal writings, a few had talked together on the phone, others maintained a link through professional organizations. Over all, although they recognized differences between feminist and woman-positive approaches to choosing activities, this did not pose a problem for them. They looked forward to learning more from each other as the project progressed.

> I think those that were married with children were a little afraid to call themselves feminist because how could you be a feminist and still be a mother and a wife? And then there were those that were not married and had no children. And then there were those that may have been gay. To me, it was like there were different types of people. It didn't bother me. I could see that there were differences, but then that's okay. That's what makes an interesting group. (Debbie Heagy, WEST)

We returned to this question of woman-positive/feminist in the second interview nine months later. In the meantime, having completed the first workshop, the first program visits, and the first interviews, having planned the woman-positive activities and begun to implement and document them, we began to focus on completing the descriptions of each community, program, and woman-positive activity. In doing so, we often discovered just how difficult it is to describe in straightforward terms how adult literacy programs develop, how they are funded, and how they are staffed. These descriptions are included in Chapter 6 of this book.

3

Discussion/Reflection/ Documentation

3-1 Preparation for the second workshop

After the first national workshop, Frances and I maintained contact with women through frequent mailings, individual phone conversations, a visit to each program, ongoing discussion about their program descriptions and interview transcripts, and regular (or irregular) exchanges of reflective writing. Some women consistently sent journals every week or two weeks. Others wrote regularly, but did not give us what they had written until we visited the program or saw them at a workshop. Other women did not find it possible or helpful to write regularly. They might save their half days for a month or even two, then spend a block of time on their own, with their partner, or with all the participants in their woman-positive activity. Members of an affinity group from the first workshop circulated reflective writing among themselves.

Each time it seemed as if particular women or programs might be letting the research lapse, a phone call or package of mail would arrive. These contacts showed how much impact the project was having on women's lives. Clearly, not everyone experienced change and development to the same degree. Some women maintained a primarily professional interest while others underwent significant personal and political turmoil. A few women, usually those involved less directly in a woman-positive activity, continued to be supportive and curious about what was happening in their own program. Their interest arose less from our particular research questions than from their own long-term experience in educational programing or community and women's activities.

We sent out a questionnaire about the second workshop, asking women what they would and would not like to do. We also included a series of possible discussion topics based on our conversations with the programs over the last three months. Women indicated their first three choices and added further suggestions. Reading the women's responses, we discovered how much they wanted to hear about others' experiences. Almost all the women set a high priority on beginning with a ten minute report from each program. They especially wanted to know details of the woman-positive activities — what worked, what didn't work, and how both the programs and the women had changed.

Women who attended the second national workshop

Aisla Thomson and Dianne Palachik
CCLOW, Toronto, ON
Betty-Ann Lloyd
Co-ordinating Researcher, Halifax, NS
Frances Ennis
Co-ordinating Researcher, St. John's, NF
Evelyn Batteil
Advisory Committee, Duncan, BC
Kathleen Rockhill
Advisory Committee, Toronto, ON
Karen Bergman-Illnik and Angeline Kablutsiak
Arctic College, Arviat, NWT
Shirley Hickey and Cathy Short
Rabbittown Learners Program, St. John's, NF
Mary Snow and Marion Wells
Saint John Learning Exchange, Saint John, NB
Christeen Gangadeen and Amele Zewge
Toronto ALFA Centre, Toronto, ON
Pat MacNeil and Robin Silverman Allcorn
Beat the Street, Toronto, ON
Lynda Lehman and Anne Moore
Action Read, Guelph, ON
Diane Eastman and Gail Lanoie
Brandon Friendship Centre, Brandon, MB
Debbie Heagy and Nicole Jessop
WEST, Regina, SK
Wanita Koczka and LaVera Schiele
Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Prince Albert, SK
Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney
College of New Caledonia, Prince George, BC
Kate Nonesuch and Vicki Noonan
Malaspina College, Duncan, BC

They wanted reassurance that they were meeting our expectations in terms of doing the research. Many women experienced anxiety around their journal writing (or lack of journal writing!) and wanted to know exactly what we wanted in terms of documentation. As practitioners, they felt confident about their literacy work. As researchers, they felt less confident. In general, women wanted a variety of small groups at the workshop. While a very few preferred working in a large group, they all acknowledged a need for information and feedback sessions.

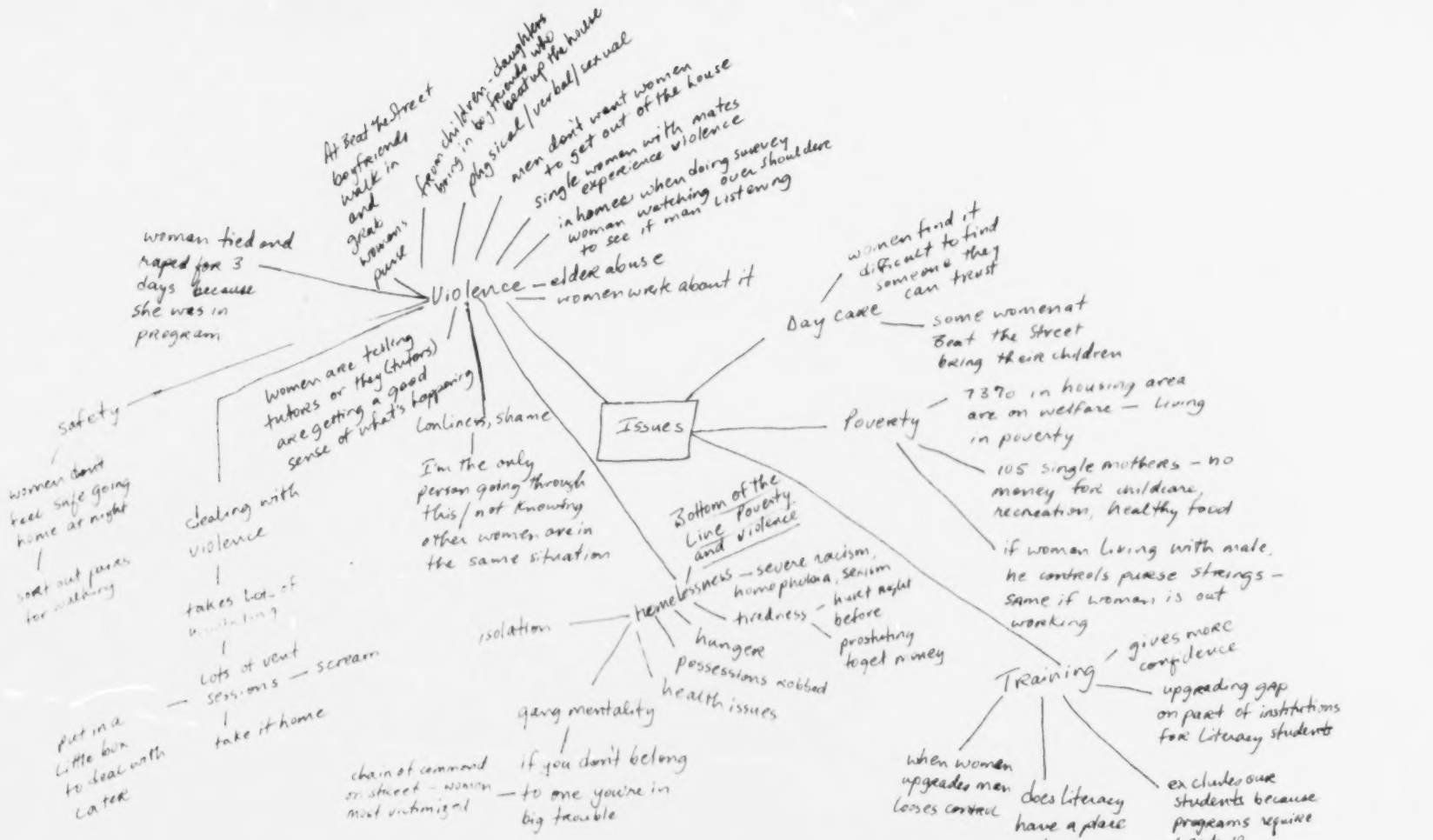
They asked for frequent breaks, for free evenings, and, if possible, a visit to Beat the Street, one of the programs located in Toronto. They suggested warm-ups and singing, information about CCLOW's other activities, and ideas about how we might stay in touch once this project finished. One woman asked for a method other than large-group consensus for decision-making "so that those who are less vocal will be heard." Two other women, referring back to the first workshop, asked that we let go of the need to label ourselves and others and, instead, "create an atmosphere of tolerance and recognize that we are all struggling."

3-2 The second workshop

The second workshop took place in Toronto from April 23 to April 26, 1992. Twenty-eight program women attended, twenty of whom had attended the first workshop. Aisla Thomson and Dianne Palachik participated again as CCLOW staff, and Frances and I facilitated. Two advisory committee members, Evelyn Battell and Kathleen Rockhill, attended some sessions and facilitated two workshops.

The agenda was based on women's evaluation of the first workshop, their suggestions during our first visit, and their response to the survey earlier that month. We also reviewed the research design. As we moved from description and action into discussion and documentation, we wanted to maintain a focus on the research questions and the woman-positive activities. The strength of our work originated in the experience of actually doing something woman-positive and then having the opportunity to reflect, discuss, analyze, and document out of those experiences. This opportunity to get together with other women doing the same kind of work provided both support and challenge. We set out the following objectives for our four days together.

- To get acquainted/reacquainted
- To get an update on the woman-positive activity in each program
- To review the research design and timelines for program work
- To identify and discuss issues arising in programs and for women as a result of doing the woman-positive activities
- To discuss program and project documentation, including the poster, the program descriptions, the program products and the final publication(s)


Violence
woman tied and raped for 3 days because she was in program
At Beat the Street boyfriends walk in and grab women's purse
Issues
Safety
women don't feel safe going home at night
Dealing with violence
takes lot of motivation
Lots of vent sessions — scream
take it home
put in a little box to deal with later
Women are telling tutors or they (tutors) are getting a good sense of what's happening
Loneliness, shame
I'm the only person going through this / not knowing other women are in the same situation
Bottom of the Line Poverty and Violence
Homelessness — severe racism, homophobia, sexism
tiredness — hurt right before
hunger
Possessions robbed
health issues
isolation
gang mentality
if you don't belong — to one you're in big trouble
chain of command on street — women most victimized
Day care
women find it difficult to find someone they can trust
some women at Beat the Street bring their children
Poverty
73% in housing area are on welfare — living in poverty
105 single mothers — no money for childcare, recreation, healthy food
if woman living with male, he controls purse strings — same if woman is out working
Training
gives more confidence
upgrading gap on part of institutions for Literacy students
when women upgrades men loses control
does literacy have a place in dealing with these issues?
might be a way to cut out whole groups of people
excludes our students because programs require grade 10
need to link with groups providing access to everyone

Developing a web chart

In the first group that worked with Frances, one woman began by talking about how the issue of poverty came out over and over again during their woman-positive activity. Another woman talked about how violence — physical, verbal, and sexual violence — was a major issue for women in her program. This prompted a lot of discussion, leading to issues of homelessness, training, and childcare.

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- To introduce the objectives of the third workshop, including the process of collaborative analysis

As women arrived at the Glenerin Inn in a suburb of Toronto they seemed shocked by the contrast between the spartan retreat centre we used for the first workshop and this relatively luxurious complex. Those of us who had made the arrangements, quickly and quite self-consciously reassured women that CCLOW had managed to get an excellent conference rate because of the recession and that we were not paying the prices posted in each room. Throughout the four days, however, women continued to use the setting as a metaphor for the luxury of attention we seldom are given and seldom feel comfortable taking.

We spent Thursday afternoon and evening telling stories about what had happened since we last met. Earlier in the month, women had received the written descriptions of all the communities, programs, and woman-positive activities. Hearing each woman's personal interpretation added many different layers. Women had a chance to meet in their affinity groups from the first workshop and many stayed up late talking informally with each other.

The next morning we reviewed the research design and timelines and had a general discussion about documentation. We talked about the different forms of documentation currently being produced. We had women's journals and interview transcripts. We had descriptions of each program, its community, and its woman-positive activity. In some programs, those involved in the activities planned to produce books, a set of pamphlets, a poster, a newspaper, or a policy statement. CCLOW planned to produce a poster representing the entire project and to develop a final publication outlining the research process.

After this review, women divided into three different groups according to the kinds of documentation they planned for their programs. These groups rotated through three different hour-long activities.

- **Activity 1**: The women worked with each other and with Aisla Thomson on their program descriptions. They asked questions and suggested additions or changes. They started to talk about the next section to be added, the section describing what happened because of the woman-positive activities.

  Activity 2: I reviewed the documentation process with the program women in each group. We discussed what they had been doing, how useful it was, what they might want to change, and how they saw their final program product developing. We also talked briefly about ideas for the final project publication(s).

  Activity 3: Frances facilitated a process where women named the issues arising both within their programs and within themselves as a consequence of implementing their woman-positive activity. She used a web chart to document these discussions, introducing one way we might move into collaborative analysis.

After women in each program cycled through these three activities, they met in the afternoon to participate in one of three workshops.

Workshop 1: I facilitated a guided reflective writing workshop, offering women the opportunity to explore something that had happened in their woman-positive activity that they wanted to understand better.

Workshop 2: Frances facilitated a discussion on how women's participation in the research was affecting their personal and professional lives. Women explored how they were changing and if they thought they would be able to continue with woman-positive work once the project ended.

Workshop 3: Kathleen Rockhill and Evelyn Battell facilitated a discussion examining the question: How do you work with differing interests among students, colleagues, various administrative channels, different forces in the community? For example, what do you do when different students have different agendas, when students' desires conflict with the desires of the funding agency?

Several women visited Beat the Street and its neighbourhood. This photograph is from Recipes for Political Action published by the women's committee at Beat the Street.

Following these sessions, most women went into Toronto for the evening. Many chose to visit Beat the Street with Robin Silverman Allcorn and Pat MacNeil. This experience touched many women deeply. Cathy Short (Rabbittown Learners Program) later wrote a piece that was included in Beat the Street's documentation, Recipes for political action. (1993) She talked about her profound shock at seeing women, men, girls, boys, and babies living on the streets.

> The street walk is an experience I'll never forget. I saw and heard things that I've only seen on TV or read about. . . . I met a woman who lived on the street and I met her infant baby. Although I was told this was nothing unusual, I couldn't help feeling sad. It was 9:30 in the night and it was raining. . . .
>
> I can't put on paper the different feelings I experienced that night. There were times that I just wanted to cry because I felt so helpless. People on the

street help each other and different groups help out too. I can only say, "Thank you, Beat the Street." (p. 35)

On Saturday, we spent the morning in small group discussions. We set up different options based on the responses to the pre-workshop questionnaire and women had the chance to choose one from Session A for the first ninety minutes, then one from Session B for the next ninety minutes.

Session A:

- What do we find are the positive and negative sides of doing women-only activities in our programs?
- How can we work with the question: What about the men?
- How can we sort out what is "woman-positive" when we are not doing explicit women's issues or when we don't have a women-only group?
- Do you feel split by different needs or demands? This is a repeat of the workshop offered by Kathleen and Evelyn, described above. Some women continued with this workshop throughout the entire morning, others joined in after Session A.

Session B:

- What happens when we work as feminists in our programs? How is this different than doing woman-positive work? (A group for women who define themselves as feminist.)
- What happens when we work as feminists in our programs? How is this different than doing woman-positive work? (A group for women who don't necessarily define themselves as feminist or who are struggling with the concept.)
- What do we think makes a program "safe" for women — especially women who have been physically or sexually abused, women who are dealing with racism or cultural ignorance, women who are in conflict with the law, women who have disabilities.

By lunchtime, women had completely taken over this process! As small groups formed and reformed throughout the morning, discussions took on a life of their own. One group decided to do some theatre work, moving from discussion into a skit that they would perform at that night's Show and Tell. Other groups decided to redefine their subject and continue into the afternoon. Some women carried on conversations in twos and threes.

The same flexible, informal format continued through the afternoon, with some women carrying on with their earlier discussion topics while others shifted. Some women used the topics we had planned for afternoon workshops as themes for informal discussion. One focused on possible definitions of woman-positive work and how it might be different than learner-centred, community-based, or man-positive work.

Midway through the afternoon I tried to get a sense of what women wanted to do in the "loose ends" time before supper. Without any input from the others, women in each of the different rooms were engaged in the same discussion:

> Somehow, we have to learn how to take care of ourselves or we will be of no use to anyone, including our students.

Watching the skit rehearsal, I realized they were acting out a very funny story about how so many of us at the workshop resisted accepting our right to work in the beautiful surroundings of the Inn.

All four discussions had arrived at the same point. As a researcher, I felt the excitement of having our work validated not only by each other, but by triangulation — coming to the same conclusions through a variety of processes! We felt like a community of women who, despite our many differences, could work in independent groups yet arrive at conclusions that indicated how, in fact, we were interdependent. We needed each other's support and encouragement to take care of ourselves, to meet our physical and emotional needs, so that we could continue our work. As one woman wrote in her evaluation of the workshop:

> I've had time during discussions to inquire and reflect and to realize very clearly my own issues of safety and to take seriously how I need to take care of myself and my own boundaries — rules that need to be articulated and supported through my work and co-workers.

For the rest of the afternoon, women attempted to talk about how we can take care of ourselves. It was a struggle. Another woman later wrote:

> The workshop on "How to take care of ourselves" was very difficult. We kept going back to how we take care of <u>others</u>, but eventually we did talk a lot about ourselves. We realize that for us to take care of ourselves we have to say "no" to our bosses and organizations, but not to our learners.

That evening, we laughed and applauded each other. Kate Nonesuch (Malaspina College) presented a monologue about being a lesbian out in the world and inside this project.

> I was feeling that I was too much in the closet in the group. Many of the participants knew I was a lesbian, but I didn't know if everyone knew. In any case, no one was mentioning it in casual conversation, and I wasn't mentioning it either. I knew that at least one woman in the project had been confronted with the word "dyke" back at home, and I figured it might be happening to others. So I talked about three things: first, I told Kate Clinton's joke about coming out to George Bush because her mother had said, "Don't tell your father, it will kill him."
>
> Then, I talked about "flaunting." It seems to me that whenever lesbians push the edges, when they neck in public, or wear outrageous slogans on their T-shirts, or insist on coming out at times and places where it might seem irrelevant, they make it safer for other women to make some choices

in their own lives. When lesbians say we can live our lives without men, we make it possible for women who choose to be straight to be more independent in their relationships with men. All this aside, flaunting is fun and empowering.

Finally, I talked about safety on the streets. I know that when I am walking out at night and I see a group of people coming towards me, I am apprehensive until I see that some of the group are women. Those straight women, in relation to these men, make me feel safer. The work that straight women do in relationship with some men makes them less dangerous to me. I wanted to let women know that I recognize that work. One of the other women in the group replied, "It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it."

Doing this monologue freed me up to work in the group. I felt that everyone knew who I was and where I was coming from. I had been feeling uncomfortable before I did it; afterwards, I felt great.

Although it was hard to do, I felt safe doing it in this group — I felt sure that everyone would accept my saying the things I said; while I didn't expect everyone to agree with me that it is wonderful to be a lesbian, I didn't expect anyone to treat me badly because of what I said.

We then watched the skit, laughing as we recognized ourselves arriving, talking with each other about our lives since we last met, and exclaiming about the surroundings. Two women had been given a room with a hot tub, a matter for much discussion. We were all invited to share this extravagance. As one woman stepped into the hot tub — dressed in her trench coat, with her briefcase in hand — another women apologized non-stop for even having a hot tub. She repeated again and again that we had not paid even a fraction of the regular rate to have our conference at the Inn. Really, we didn't want anyone to think we would take such good care of ourselves!

The Glenerin Inn setting became a symbol of how we do — or don't — take care of ourselves. (Photograph courtesy of the Glenerin Inn)

Several women made presentations on some aspect of their programs. Karen Bergman-Illnik and Angeline Kablutsiak (Arctic College) talked about how the Women's Upgrading Program and the Moms and Tots literacy group complemented each other. Wanita Koczka (Pine Grove Correctional Centre) told us she was co-editing a special issue on women, violence, and learning for CCLOW's magazine — Women's Education des femmes. She encouraged all women to submit work from

Artwork produced by women from the Women's Committee at Beat the Street.

their programs. We also looked at some of the artwork created by members of the Women's Committee at Beat the Street

The next morning, we discussed different design possibilities for a poster to represent the project, outlined options for the final documentation, answered specific questions, and met one more time in the small documentation groups. Finally, everyone completed an evaluation of the workshop and said good-bye.

In their evaluations, women discussed the different parts of the workshop: reporting on individual programs and activities, developing documentation, participating in issue-oriented workshops and discussion groups, and having time for informal conversations. While the overwhelming response was positive, many women talked about needing to get away from the intensity of discussion by having more time to relax or to take part in physical activities.

A few women wanted us to be more action-oriented. They felt impatient that we didn't move on from talking about women's experience to doing something about it.

> We sometimes felt frustrated by the lack of problem-solving approaches to specific questions, especially with regard to getting things to work when we go home. The two main modes of communication seemed to be venting and listening/responding sympathetically to what was being vented.

Others felt not enough time was spent talking about the actual mechanics of the research. Although most gained confidence about how they might document their own program work, others felt "fuzzy" or anxious that they didn't know what would be expected from them.

For most, the comments focused on the sheer exhilaration of having time, space, encouragement, and safety to talk about some of the most difficult aspects of literacy work. They appreciated not only the stimulation, but the opportunity to "bridge ideological gaps at our own pace, on our own grounds, not as polarized groups."

> I blabbered on. Getting out all the words that I don't/can't get out at home. Massive eruption.
>
> The conversations in this group are like no other. I enjoyed them, found strength in them, learned from them.

I appreciated the opportunity to grapple with some issues on an intellectual level with women working in the literacy field.

I think most women felt they were among supportive women. This may have been the most woman-positive dimension of the whole three days: feeling respected and supported so consistently during casual and more formal discussions and conversations.

A few women continued to express concern that so much of the discussion centred on the negative issues facing women. Others felt like this was the only place they had to approach their work critically and to grapple honestly with the reality of many women's lives.

Talking with other women is the best support a project like this could give. It gives me more strength in my woman-positive work and makes me feel connected instead of isolated.

Listening to the struggles we all have when we try to put our beliefs into practice was discouraging and encouraging. Discouraging because I once again realize how hard that is to do and how much resistance there still is in our society to women existing as equals. Encouraging because we're still pushing.

Artwork produced by women from the Women's Committee at Beat the Street.

A few women referred back to some of the awkwardness at the first workshop. One wrote about the way in which she felt comfortable with and accepted by those women she had been a bit anxious about meeting again.

The blocks dissipated. . . . and I felt like we moved towards friendship and understanding. I feel like there is much more that I want to say to all of them.

Another woman suggested that the second meeting provided an opportunity for women from very different programs and perspectives to get a better sense of each other.

We were very serious, yet there was some very deep laughter. I just love the different personalities and how these bring out both the sharing of serious [thoughts] yet the humour of our differences.

Most women mentioned that they learned a great deal about literacy and about group dynamics from each other: "I'd like to get back and start working on

these ideas with our group!" Women seemed to have shifted from understanding their activity as simply part of a project. It was no longer an object of research, but a part of their work. Another woman observed that, compared to the first workshop, we seemed less concerned about presenting ourselves as confident or professional in terms of implementing woman-positive activities.

> We talked about them in November in a detached way, from a distance. Here it was clear we had all experienced profoundly, been changed, touched deeply. We talked with more meaning.

3-3 The second visit

After the second workshop, Frances and I wanted to continue moving the focus from description/reflection/action to discussion/reflection/documentation. Building on the momentum of the recent meeting, women found effective ways of documenting their experiences. They moved from the more private journal writing and one-on-one interviews to a more public interpretation of what had happened for them in their programs. We maintained fairly extensive telephone contact with most of the women, as they completed the "This is what happened" section of their program descriptions and decided how to develop what we called the program products. As these products went through their many versions, we provided feedback and editorial assistance.

I met with Eileen Gorman and LaVera Schiele in the classroom at Pine Grove Correctional Centre.

Much of this work was done during the second visit we made to the programs. Frances flew to Toronto in September, combining one of our planning sessions with visits to Beat the Street and Toronto ALFA Centre. I drove my van through the Maritimes to Toronto and then carried on across the country, stopping at each program in turn.

The year before, when I had flown in and out of each of these communities, I had developed an eagle eye's view of Canada and how, as women, we are connected by a complex technology. Our phones and faxes, planes and inter-city buses put us in touch with each other in a way that allows for immediate response, ongoing connection. This time around, I recognized how the geographic location of our communities shape our experience, just as we try to shape our surroundings with our sense of what we believe is possible in each particular place we inhabit. Driving through the prairies,

across mountains, over rivers and canyons, I began to believe it is a miracle that we can communicate at all.

Yet, communicate we did, using a heavy agenda to guide conversations during the one to three day visits in each location. We reviewed the research design and questions to ensure that the program descriptions focused on "what actually happens when some women in an adult literacy program decide to do something they consider woman-positive." This piece of the documentation was meant to satisfy those readers who wanted the facts: who, what, where, when, how, why. Should we run into funding difficulties for the final segment of the research, these descriptions could constitute our research report.

Debbie Heagy, Nicole Jessop, and I planned their documentation in a Saskatoon hotel.

We wanted to make sure that the poster photographs and statements from each program would help other students and staff begin a discussion about what it means to do something woman-positive in their own programs. We discussed the program products as something that would allow women to express their own experience in a way that did not have to conform to any kind of standard format. We tried to get a sense of how different women approached their writing, how they felt about editing, ownership. How much input from us did they expect or would they appreciate?

Either during the visit or later, over the phone, we collected personal, professional, and political data from each woman. Based on our experiences of reading research we expected others to want to know who we were, where we were coming from. We asked the women involved what they would want to know about anyone doing research in their field and what they thought others might want to know. We developed a data form that was modified after women provided feedback. It gave us room to record women's experience in their programs and their communities. We talked about education and work histories, philosophies and politics, and personal background. If women did not feel comfortable with any of the questions, they didn't have to answer them. The responses are outlined in Chapter Six of this book.

Diane Eastman and I met in a beautiful Brandon park for our second interview.

3-4 The second interview

The second interviews with the contact women also took place during our visits. These took anywhere from twenty to ninety minutes, covering nine general areas of interest as outlined on a common interview schedule. We asked women to describe what had happened with their woman-positive activity, what effect it had on them, on other staff, and on students. We talked about what they had learned personally, professionally, and politically. We asked them to talk about the resistance they encountered. We asked how they had experienced the work as "research."

As a move into analysis, we asked them to name the three issues they became most aware of during the project and what they envisioned as possible woman-positive developments in their programs in the future. In order to get ready for the third workshop, we discussed what they thought we meant by "collaborative analysis" and what they wanted to happen at the third workshop. Finally, we referred back to the first interview and asked how their understandings of "woman-positive" and "feminist" changed over the time of the project, as well as how they now understood the relationship between the two.

Many women used this interview and their review of the typed transcripts as a way to develop their interpretation and analysis of what had happened over the last year. The questions moved from the concrete to the reflective to the categorical providing a process for women to use their own experiences and make room for the experiences of other women involved in the research. Much of what women said during the second interview is not included here because it appears elsewhere in the documentation of this research — in the program descriptions, collaborative analysis, recommendations, and in Women in literacy speak — The power of woman-positive literacy work. Nevertheless, many of the responses to the questions on what women learned and where they experienced resistance provide a context for the work of the collaborative analysis at the third workshop.

• What have you learned personally, professionally, and politically because of your participation in this project?

Many of the women had trouble distinguishing between personal, professional, and political changes, experiencing these areas of their lives as completely intertwined. Changes in one area automatically meant changes in the other areas. For example, Nancy Steel (Keyano College) talked about how her greatest learning came because she was challenged to think of women not only as learners and students, but as women learners and women students. She first identified this as a professional issue, then realized it was also political. It forced her to rethink her assumptions about how to interact with students in a democratic classroom. While she still wanted to see students as individuals, she now adds to that her understanding of women as a specific group with specific learning needs and interests, viewpoints and positions that are valid enough to be explored, that

are not considered too emotional or too difficult, or too unconcrete or too ambiguous to explore.

Women talked about how they learned from the experience of making public statements about women's experience in literacy programs. Some of the women became stronger and more confident about all aspects of their lives. For other women, speaking out led to unexpected difficulties, including violence or the threat of violence within their programs. For still others, it led to personal disappointment and growth as they dealt with the response — or lack of response — from colleagues, family members, or friends.

Many women had to deal with their increased awareness of men's violence against women. They not only had to deal with it on a professional level — in their programs, classrooms, and during one-on-one tutoring sessions — they also had to deal with it in their personal lives. Robin Silverman Allcorn (Beat the Street) talked about discovering how angry she feels towards men. Although this anger has been tempered by the joy of discovering what it means to work with women in a women-only group, it also leaves her with what she called "professional suicide." Like several other women, she talked about wanting to continue in woman-positive, women-only work and the difficulties that presents in the current political and economic climate.

The move into reflection and discovery, anger and joy resulted in personal changes that helped some women clarify their need for significant change, even upheaval. For some, the changes tied back into reflection and analysis around their feminist/woman-positive positions. For others, it had to do with the way in which they now understood their own experience as women. At times, it was a combination of the two.

> It made me think a lot about what feminism meant — why I was doing the things I was doing. It helped me explore my understanding of feminism and what other people might mean by feminism. . . . I know now what is more important to me personally and politically, and I don't want to waste my time not doing those things. I can't do it where I am. I don't want to do it where I am. I guess I've realized how vulnerable I am and I don't want to be that vulnerable. I want to be with a community of people who accept my way of looking at things. I don't always want to be defending myself. (Karen Bergman-Illnik, Arctic College)

Several women experienced important life changes during this project. For them, it was a time of intense transition. For others, it was a time of integration and consolidation.

Having to reconcile philosophical and political understandings of competing interests in their programs and in their lives was a common experience. Several women talked about how they came to a new understanding of what "equality" or "learner-centred" or "democratic" or "rights" might mean. Once they started to focus on women's experience as central rather than marginal, it seemed that equity rather than equality became a more legitimate measuring stick.

For some, this meant breaking free of an almost paralyzing need to be "fair." A few women talked about how, in the past, fairness appeared to mean giving everyone equal right to expression, to attention, to choice about acceptable behaviour in programs.

> If you're working in a mixed program of marginalized people, that idea of fairness really has to come across in everything you do. I mean these people, men and women, have been ripped off at every turn in their lives and I feel like, "who am I to suddenly come down on them really heavily." It's very hard to do that when you know this guy hasn't had food for days. To suddenly call him sexist is very hard to do. (Anne Moore, Action Read)

Through their involvement in this research, women said they recognized that individual men are often granted their rights at the expense of women who might suffer from their sexism or heterosexism, harassment, or even assault. From this realization came the recommendation that

> All staff must acknowledge that a woman's right to safety within the program takes precedence over a man's right to education.

Many women talked about their professional learning as a discovery of new writing activities, math strategies, homework incentives. Some developed new classroom practices because the research required them to pay attention to and reflect on other aspects of their work. Others commented on how they became more confident about their own writing skills since they felt obliged to meet our expectations for reflective writing. Still others said they became more aware of their teaching style and the way they like to work in a group.

Several of the women that work in more institutional settings talked about a renewed understanding of the ways those settings can fail to accommodate women who are students, clients, or inmates. Eileen Gorman (Pine Grove Correctional Centre) talked about the way she now checks with women to make sure they understand the bureaucratic language on many of the forms she has to use. Mary Ann Tierney (College of New Caledonia) described changing her class time by fifteen minutes.

> People wanted to come at 9:00, and I wanted to start at 8:45. I thought, what am I doing? These women have children, they want to come at 9:00, why don't they come at 9:00? And so, since we came back from Winnipeg, I've started having my classes at 9:00. That's just a little tiny thing, but part of it is I don't have kids so although I know about those stresses, I don't really know what they're like day in and day out.

Many women believed they learned a great deal more about what it means to be a woman. For some, that meant a better understanding of their own reality as women.

> Awareness and sensitivity. It's been great. I've learned a lot as far as what it means to me, personally, to be a woman. I took things for granted. I

> look at things differently now. (Mary Snow, Saint John Learning Exchange)

For others, it focused on other women's reality — particularly the many small but often insurmountable obstacles women may face when they are trying to get to a program. Women talked about this learning in practical terms, in terms of being able now to watch for and anticipate difficulties.

> It means thinking of all those possible barriers, what they are, what is there. . . . Are there women and are they participating and why aren't they participating? Those are questions that will definitely come to my mind every time I do things. (Amele Zewge, Toronto ALFA Centre)

They also talked about the frustration of seeing the barriers women face and being unable to do much about them.

> What can you do if a woman is home with three children and she's on social services, other than take the money out of your own pocket and pay for a babysitter. Go and pick her up and bring her to the program, whatever program it is, and then bring her home after. What can you do? (Cathy Short, Rabbittown Learners' Program)

Several women talked about developing a new sense of the boundaries they have to maintain if they are going to continue with one-on-one work, especially work with women struggling constantly for sheer survival.

> I've learned more about the boundaries that I don't have and what I need for myself. I do a lot of the one-on-one student support things. Sometimes I take it home with me and that can be a real issue — being at home, wondering if the woman is going back to her abusive partner. (Pat MacNeil, Beat the Street)

They also talked about the need, on a structural level, to hold politicians accountable beyond the level of rhetoric for the way that women's issues and the issues of poverty are continually denied and ignored.

• What do you think has been key to your learning?

Almost all the women said that the key to their learning came from having the opportunity to reflect on their work within a structured project. Having the financial support, the resources of the coordinating researchers, and the expectation that they would document their experience helped women move from "doing" to "thinking about doing."

> If someone doesn't encourage me to do the thinking piece it can be easy for me to leave behind sitting down at the keyboard and pounding out reflections, reading extra stuff when I really haven't got time. (Diane Eastman, Brandon Friendship Centre)

Having national workshops to discuss, challenge, and affirm their experience

was also central to women's learning. Many said it was the sense of other women involved in the work that helped them move beyond the everyday practice of literacy work to reflection, then more conscious action. The intense discussion as well as the promise of developing a collaborative analysis and recommendations meant that women believed they would be able to actually get something done.

> I think the key was the workshops. I think it's getting together with all these women. . . . getting so many different perspectives on all this. I think us standing together makes us feel better too — maybe we can make a difference. (Shirley Hickey, Rabbittown Learners Program)

Some of the women felt that having a clearly articulated philosophical framework when they came to the research often helped them move into their activities with more confidence. Others talked about how they could understand resistance — or even avoid it — because of the ways in which they understood power relations in their particular setting. Other women talked about the way in which their strong grounding in humanistic thought allowed them to challenge assumptions in others and in themselves. Others suggested that the complete newness of what they were discovering led to an enthusiasm that provided energy for the extra work under difficult circumstances.

• What resistance to your woman-positive activity did you experience?

When we asked this question women often went through a series of reflections before finally settling on an answer. Some first said there was no resistance, then qualified that by outlining one incident or several incidents that might be interpreted as resistance. Others first said that there had been resistance, then qualified that by suggesting that they might have been paranoid that day or that they might be over-reacting.

Some women experienced resistance from all directions: administration or board of directors, other staff, students, family members, themselves. Some women talked unequivocally about the encouragement they received from everyone involved. For most women, their experience fell between these two. They encountered resistance, most of it passive or indirect. It often seemed more like benign neglect, disinterest. They felt ignored, but that ignorance did not often become openly expressed.

The most blatant forms of resistance clearly came from men students. In one instance, a few men became physically violent or threatened physical violence in response to the woman-positive activity. They blocked the woman-positive activity or made their presence continually known.

> Certainly in the earlier stages the men would all make comments like, "Oh, you're going to have your women bitch session tonight." Or five of them would walk by at 7:00 to see how many women showed up. Even now occasionally, certain men, almost always the same ones, show up at the

door and say, "Oh shit, I forgot it's women's night." Or they show up at 9:00 and say, "Any women need a walk home?" (Robin Silverman Allcorn, Beat the Street)

In those programs where women experienced resistance from men, they interpreted that resistance as a fearful response. Men felt afraid of what might happen, afraid of losing some control over what happened in the program or at home.

Many women talked about the lack of funding for their work as a major source of resistance. For some, it was an active resistance that threatened to close down the activity or the program. For others, it reflected the generally passive resistance to anything that involves women and literacy. Once this project ended, some women felt priorities might change within their programs. They experienced that as a kind of resistance.

> The staff is so busy with all the other things going on that we talked about putting the women's group on hold for a while. That really worries me because it means all this exciting stuff that we've been doing, this vision that we have, is going to go on hold because of the fact that we wouldn't have the staff to do it. That's heartbreaking. (Amele Zewge, Toronto ALFA Centre)

Another kind of passive resistance — perhaps the most pervasive — was the simple lack of time most women had to plan and facilitate the activities, and to carry out the research.

Many women acknowledged that they had not set out to challenge the existing philosophies of their programs. They wanted to work within that framework to explore what might fit without a large degree of disruption. Other women talked about the ways in which their position in the hierarchy or in the collective structure of their programs gave them credibility. A few mentioned that they could not be resisted directly because they had an excellent history of teaching or administration within their programs.

• Do you identify yourself as a feminist? Do you think of feminism any differently than when we started this work?

Many women stated a simple "yes," they do identify as feminist. They had called themselves feminists coming into the project and nothing had changed. Some women said "yes, but . . ." Others said "no, but . . ." Still others said "no." Many women talked about having a clearer sense of their own definitions of feminism. Others said they hadn't found one that fit quite comfortably.

> I'm still searching. I don't think that I would identify myself as a feminist just yet. (Mary Snow, Saint John Learning Exchange)

A few remained reluctant to apply any label to their commitment to working with women.

> I'm still as confused as ever. (Laughter) I definitely know that I am committed to working for issues related to women and in any forum. Whether that is called feminism or not, I'll leave it. (Amele Zewge, Toronto ALFA Centre)

Several women who said they were still getting used to the idea of "feminist" mentioned their attraction to two of the quotes women used throughout the year.

> Any woman who tells the truth about herself is a feminist. (Alice Munro quoted by Olivia Ward. (May 6, 1979). The Toronto Star.)

> I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat. (Rebecca West. (November 14, 1913). The Clarion.)

Many women talked about learning more about themselves because of the feminist nature of much of the work that was done during the project. They thoughtfully discussed the ways in which this research helped them become clearer about what feminism means for their work. The support and insights from the project allowed a significant number of women to make changes in their personal and professional lives.

Developing more respect for each other — feminists for non-feminists, non-feminists for feminists — was a common experience. Mary Ann Tierney (New Caledonia College) talked about how the strengthening of her own convictions gave her space to be more open to others.

> I think I have become stronger in my own belief in myself as a feminist, but I don't now believe everybody I know has to call herself one. . . . I think I'm prepared to be a little gentler with that term. I do think I am more accepting of the idea that women can do wonderful things for women and not be feminists.

Nicole Jessop (WEST) talked about this increase in respect as a willingness to listen to what women are actually saying and doing.

> I just assumed that all the people who call themselves feminists were just like they are in the newspapers. [This project] has helped me realize that when somebody comes up and says "Yes, I'm a feminist," I should actually listen to what they have to say instead of saying, "Oh my god, not one of you." Now I would listen and say, "What do you mean by that? What do you believe in?" and try to understand if their beliefs were the same as mine.

Some women came to see feminism as less agenda-driven.

> I see that feminism has a concrete soft side that I didn't know about, it has an aspect that is not overtly political but that is feminist because it assists and empowers women. (Marion Wells, Saint John Learning Exchange)

Others discovered that feminists do not all have the same beliefs. They came to recognize the diversities among women who are called — and who call themselves — feminist. Several women said the theoretical differences are just not important to them.

> My sort of marginal experience with academics discussing feminism is that it really doesn't matter a lot to me in my life right now. My understanding and practice of feminism is very basic and grassroots and relevant in my life. And that's what matters to me right now. (Karen Bergman-Illnik, Arctic College)

> The definition that I have of "feminist" gets broader and broader, until I have stopped trying to make a definition. I identify as a feminist. If there is another woman that identifies as a feminist, I don't stop and check her definition. I just say, "Okay, let's go." (Kate Nonesuch, Malaspina College)

Other women who define themselves as feminist talked about their increased awareness that much of the discussion around feminist issues does not make sense in the contexts of their programs. Where students and staff are interested in day-to-day survival, feminism often seemed an abstraction, not grounded in the ordinariness of women's lives. Anne Moore (Action Read) experienced this in her group.

> I have just experimented in a group with using those two words and seeing what people's reaction to them is. "Feminist" comes up with lots of blocks. I would say, "Can you imagine calling yourself a feminist?" For them, it's a very elitist thing and they don't know if it happens in Guelph. They think it happens in big cities, far off from here. It's probably in Toronto. But "woman-positive" has had much more reception in the group and in the program. I work with two co-workers that identify themselves as feminist and two who have problems with the word, or the label, or the movement, or whatever. They are much more comfortable talking about woman-positive.

There was, for many, a struggle to clarify whether "feminist" is something qualitatively different than "woman-positive." Several women talked about understanding woman-positive as something that you might do, whereas feminist was something that you are, that you believe in. Both of them imply a way of thinking — yet only feminism is a philosophy. Where woman-positive is useful as a way of describing behaviour or activities, it doesn't come with an analysis of structural and systemic oppression.

Many women said that a person could do woman-positive things without being feminist, without having a feminist analysis as a framework. However, as Eileen Gorman (Pine Grove Correctional Centre) added, "I think that if a woman is a feminist she can be more forceful in presenting a woman-positive activity." She said a feminist might have a better sense of the resistance and ways around the resistance. As other women suggested, however, women who aren't feminists might have a better chance of reaching a compromise that allows something woman-positive to go forward.

Pat MacNeil (Beat the Street) talked about the importance of having a choice about using the terms "feminist" or "woman-positive." She saw "woman-positive" as a way to include women whose everyday lives are full of behaviour she would call feminist.

> I think that there are lots of women who speak up for women, for their rights and for the rights of other women, and help them. There are women who live in Ontario Housing Projects who take in every woman who's being abused. They hide them and help them and they would never identify themselves as feminist. Woman-positive they could relate to.

At the same time, she added that women should not be afraid to use the word "feminist" — it is an important political tool. Kate Nonesuch (Malaspina College) talked about the way it can identify allies.

> I find "feminist" a useful label to put on myself. If I'm in a whole crowd of women that I don't know very well, discussing an issue in education, for example, and I mention the word "feminist," the response I get gives me some kind of identification of who's on my side on that issue. . . .
>
> These days, in the backlash against feminism, I find it even more useful to notice, among white women, who is willing to say she's a feminist. I'm talking here about women who work in institutions — government and education mainly. Women who are actively feminist in those places pay for it personally and in their career paths. When I am lobbying for something for women, I feel that such a woman is a stronger ally than someone who does not identify as a feminist. I also pay attention when someone says she no longer identifies as a feminist in solidarity with women who identify feminism with white, middle class women.

At this point we had completed the second national workshop, the second program visits, and the second interviews. We had clearly moved from description and action into discussion and documentation. Women had talked about their experiences with their partners and other participants in their programs. Most had consistently written reflective journals and responded to transcriptions from their interviews. They had read other women's written material and participated in intense discussions with those who had experiences both similar to and very different from their own. We were ready to work through an analysis that began with our own experiences and extended to incorporate the experiences of other women in the project.

4

Interpretation/Analysis

4-1 Preparation for the third workshop

As women got ready for the third workshop, they received copies of all the documentation drafted to that date. This included all twelve program descriptions (included in Chapter 6 of this book), some journal writing, and a wide variety of program products. Six programs had produced material written by the students and staff involved in their woman-positive activities. Seven women wrote reflective and analytic articles. One woman produced a policy paper and curriculum guide, one adapted her journals for publication, and one developed a story that could be used as curriculum. These materials have been published in another book documenting this research, Women in literacy speak — The power of woman-positive literacy work.

During the second interview, Frances and I had asked a variety of questions in preparation for the third workshop, beginning with how women interpreted the term "collaborative analysis." Most talked about finding commonalities among different experiences, naming them, categorizing them, and putting them within a framework that made sense of the project as a whole. Several women used the imagery of weaving and the notion of connection.

Analysis was seen as a way of pulling together everything that we had learned so that we could see the whole project rather than twelve separate pieces on their own. Most women accepted that we would have different interpretations of what had happened. They didn't feel there had to be agreement on each piece of the analysis as long as any woman had the right to have significant disagreement included in the final document.

When we asked women more generally what they wanted to happen at the third workshop, they talked about focusing on our commonalities, allowing for our differences, and building on the respect and support that developed during the second workshop. Women wanted to regain the sense of connection with other women, finding out what had been happening over the last several months. They also wanted to have a sense of closure and a sense that there would be some kind of connection — that we would not all return to our communities never to talk together again.

They wanted to feel clear about the direction of the project following the workshop. Who would develop the final documentation? What might it look like?

Women who attended the third national workshop

Aisla Thomson and Dianne Palachik
CCLOW, Toronto, ON
Betty-Ann Lloyd
Coordinating Researcher, Halifax, NS
Frances Ennis
Coordinating Researcher, St. John's, NF
Tannis Atkinson
Documentation and Toronto ALFA Centre, Toronto, ON
Linda Dale, Alex Keir, and Donna Truesdale
Recorders, Ottawa, ON
Jenny Horsman
Advisory Committee, Toronto, ON
Michele Kuhlmann
Advisory Committee, Toronto, ON
Karen Bergman-Illnik
Arctic College, Arviat, NWT
Shirley Hickey and Cathy Short
Rabbittown Learners Program, St. John's, NF
Mary Snow
Saint John Learning Exchange, Saint John, NB
Alex Jones and Amele Zewge
Toronto ALFA Centre, Toronto, ON
Pat MacNeil
Beat the Street, Toronto, ON
Lynda Lehman and Anne Moore
Action Read, Guelph, ON
Diane Eastman and Gail Lanoie
Brandon Friendship Centre, Brandon, MB
Debbie Heagy and Nicole Jessop
WEST, Saskatoon, SK
Eileen Gorman, Wanita Koczka, and LaVera Schiele
Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Prince Albert, SK
Jeanne MacIntyre and Nancy Steel
Keyano College, Fort McMurray, AB
Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney
College of New Caledonia, Prince George, BC
Kate Nonesuch and Vicki Noonan
Malaspina College, Duncan, BC

How would they be involved? A few women spoke very strongly about the need to develop a publicity plan. They wanted to leave the workshop knowing that people in literacy programs, in women's organizations, in the government, and in the academic world would find out about what we had discovered.

When we asked women what they didn't want to happen they talked about process and content. They wanted to have enough time to talk things through without feeling like they had talked things to death. Kate Nonesuch (Malaspina College) identified the line that many women wanted to walk.

> I don't want discussions to disintegrate into wrangling, but neither do I want to gloss over differences.

Women wanted to come away feeling that there was some direction for the final development of the project. They didn't want to feel like they had wasted their time talking around things — they wanted something concrete because, as Vicki Noonan (Malaspina College) said, "we have no other chance."

Frances and I met in Ottawa the week before the third workshop to develop an agenda using these second interview responses and ongoing discussions with the program women as a guide. We had to move through each program's presentation of their documentation to an interpretation of the documentation as a whole. From there, we wanted to move into the collaborative analysis and a sense of completion. At the same time, we wanted to recognize women's different working styles and give women the time they needed to reconnect with each other, integrate information, and relax.

We developed three different sets of interpretive activities for Friday. For Saturday, we would use three different ways of coming at the collaborative analysis. We contacted women before the workshop to get a sense of the way in which each one wanted to work.

We also asked three Ottawa women to act as recorders. We sent them the documentation and met before the workshop to discuss their integration into the group. Alex Keir, Donna Truesdale, and Linda Dale each had a laptop computer and access to a camera. Each of them would work with one of the three groups or activities. After Tannis Atkinson left the Toronto ALFA Centre we asked her to work with us on some of the documentation for the project. She attended this workshop to facilitate discussions about the many publishing questions we needed to consider.

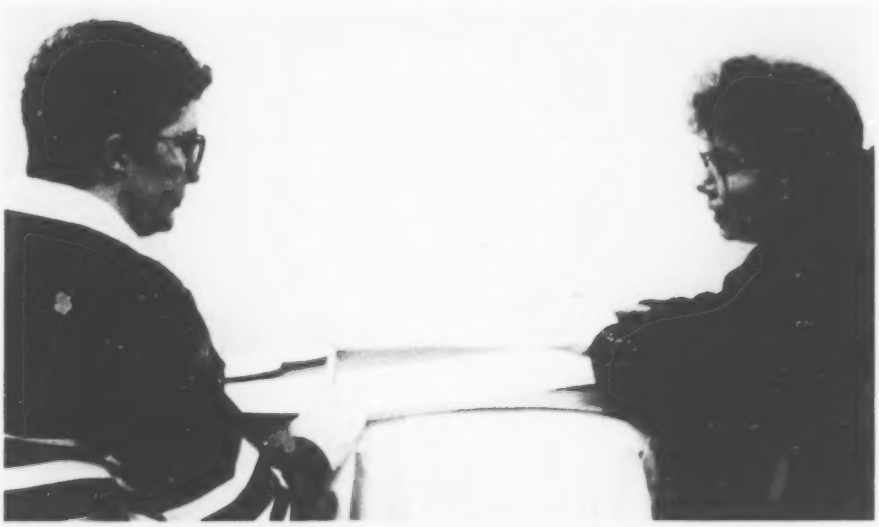
The recorders became a central part of the workshop. Here Alex Keir records the theatre group.

4-2 The third workshop

Twenty-nine women arrived at a large downtown hotel in Ottawa on Thursday afternoon. In one of the rooms Frances and I posted many of the interview comments about the third workshop. Tannis displayed the design for the poster — "Discovering the strength of our voices" — and suggested different ways of coming at the discussion around the documentation. As they arrived women gathered in this room, talking together for an hour before dinner. We spent the rest of the evening re-introducing ourselves, reviewing what women had said during the interviews, and discussing the agenda.

We talked about moving beyond description and reflection, maintaining our focus on interpretation and analysis. The "what, where, when, who, how" of the research had already been accomplished. We now needed to develop the "why," and agreed that each time someone made a descriptive statement — "Such and such happened" — the rest of us would be responsible for asking "why?"

It was also important that we stay away from general statements about women and about literacy. We wanted to stay grounded in the particular question of this research: What happens when some women in an adult literacy program decide to do something they consider woman-positive? Therefore, each time someone made a statement that wasn't grounded in our experience during this project, we would ask "Did that happen for any of us in this project? Why? Why not?"



Throughout the workshop, women worked alone, in pairs, in small groups, and the whole group to develop their analysis. Here, Vicki Noonan and Nicole Jessop develop a fan about self-esteem.

On Friday morning women separated into the three working groups they had chosen before coming to Ottawa. Frances facilitated the drawing group using a popular education process. Here, women used drawings, key words, and fans expanded from these key words to interpret women's experiences as outlined in the program descriptions and products. I facilitated the documentation group for women who had a particular interest in words and meanings. We would first talk about our response to the various forms of documentation then break into individual or small groups to further explore something of particular interest.

Karen Bergman-Illnik (Arctic College) had agreed to facilitate the theatre group where women would use several questions to develop a performance piece. Since she was delayed until the afternoon, women in that group took responsibility for facilitating themselves!

Every surface was put to use in our rooms at the hotel. Here, Pat MacNeil and Lynda Lehman develop a fan about validation.

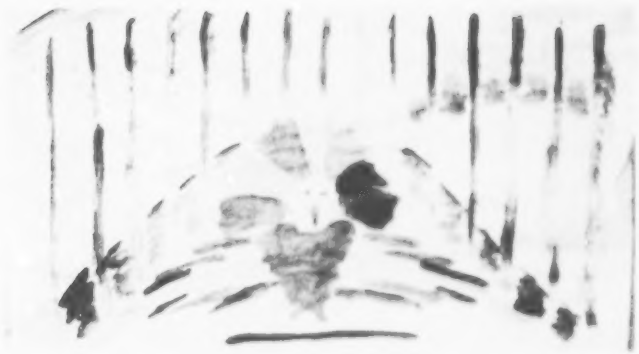
We worked in these three groups all morning and into the afternoon, coming back together at 4:00 to present our conclusions. Each group's recorder — Linda, Donna, or Alex — was present for the entire period. They recorded discussions as they happened and anything set out on flip charts. They took photographs of women at work.

In each of the three sessions, women moved from an understanding of their own experience to a consideration of women's experience in the project as a whole. They had a chance to hear other women's interpretation of what happened throughout the time of the project and to discuss where there seemed to be agreement or disagreement. Women expressed at least a part of their response in the way they felt most comfortable. When we came together at the end of the day, we had a chance to see how three different groups, working in three different ways, responded to the documentation.

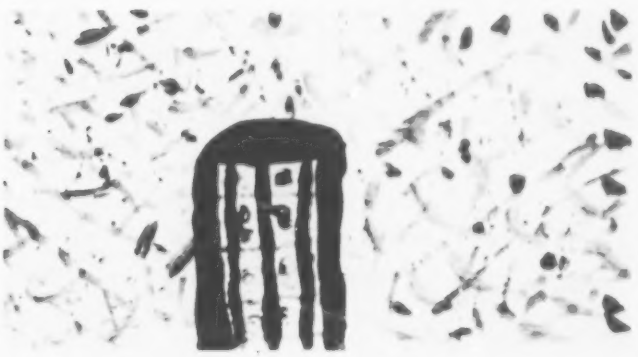
The Drawing Group

Eileen Gorman	Shirley Hickey	Nicole Jessop	Gail Lanoie
Linda Lehman	Pat MacNeil	Anne Moore	Vicki Noonan
Frances Ennis (Facilitator)		Linda Dale (Recorder)	

This group began by creating visual images that reflected the feelings they experienced as they read through the different program documentation. Some worked individually and others worked in pairs. When they gathered to discuss their work, women talked about sunshine and clouds, caged spirits, hope, excuses, injustice.



The bird is the spirit of women.
It is caged, bound to stay in the cage.
The structure is human-made.
Yellow is the sun — light.
I am excited by the colours.
Given freedom, women will start to shine.
But the bars are still there.
Some are on the inside, others are outside.
The green is the little bit of growth we see
within ourselves.

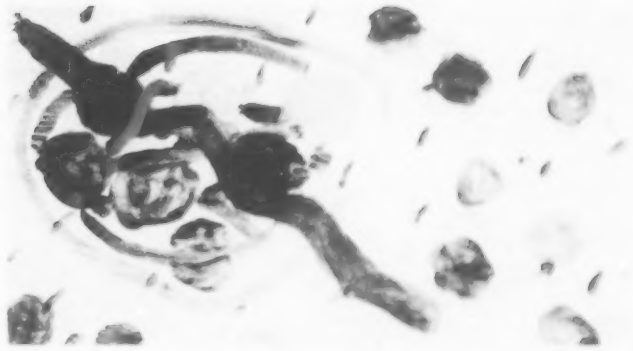


Mine is a mixture of emotions,
some are bright.
The dots are all the excuses.
The structure is very rigid —
it doesn't bend.
All the emotion . . .
is around the structure.
It doesn't get inside . . .
where it should be.

We started off with . . .
feelings of discouragement . . .
from the posture women adopt
so they won't get beaten.
But there is a lot of hope.
That was much bigger than
the gloomy things.

We felt the isolation of women
in the North.
Male domination of the culture
pulling them back.
Men don't want women
to see anything else.
This reality is not just in the North.
Women everywhere feel the threat
of conflict if they try
to do something different.

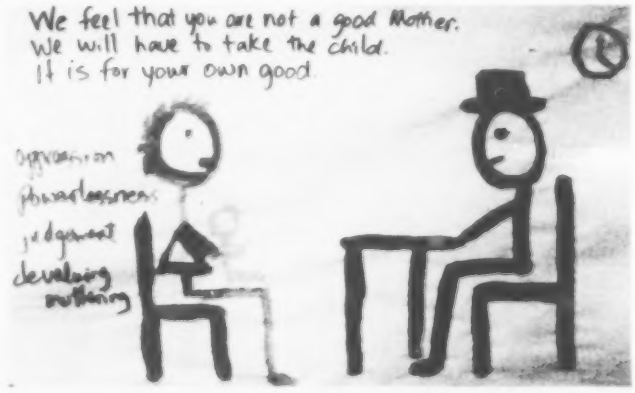
When reading the documentation
I felt the injustice.
A real sense of injustice.
Something that I see over and over again.
My father was a German Jew.
When I would say,
"Things aren't fair," he would ask
"Who said things should be fair?"



The mouth represents a woman telling
another woman how she feels.
The square is the house . . .
the box she doesn't know how to get out of.
There is a cloud over it.
The green hand is reaching out
to other women.
The yellow is the little ray of sunshine.

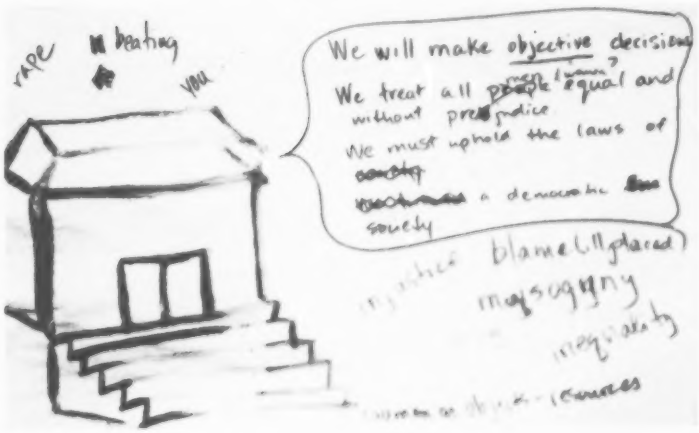
The women decided to focus on the players the pictures represent — the very visible players and those that are not so visible. Who are they? Why are they doing what they are doing? Whose interests are being met? They chose a figure to draw in more detail, then they wrote statements.

Several women focused on motherhood. So many mothers risk losing their children because they cannot provide food or shelter, because they cannot get jobs. How can they concentrate on learning? Programs cannot even offer childcare.



I drew several children. . . .
Different children with different needs.
Primarily, women meet those needs
in our society.
It affects a woman's learning.
All her choices are affected by this.

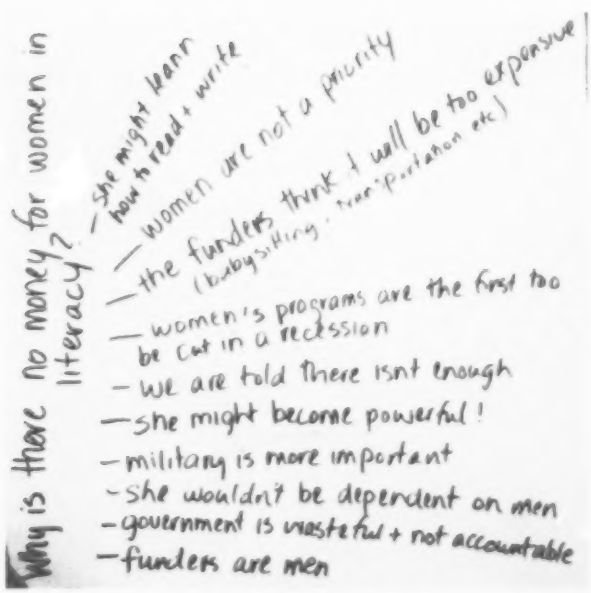
The women talked about how people are afraid of change — those who have power and those who do not. So many people say there is no need for change. "This is the way it is and you just have to accept it." At the same time, there is tremendous social pressure, tremendous guilt. Women must be good mothers no matter what their situation.



Yet women are so isolated. We are so isolated that we have little sense of community. We all live in little boxes.

Women talked about self-esteem. What does that phrase mean? Who has to take responsibility for women's self-esteem? "Even the idea of self-esteem comes from a privileged background" one woman said. There cannot be self-esteem without validation, recognition. This is something we can give each other.

Peer support is something we can encourage. But invisible in all this, at the bottom of all this, is poverty — poverty for women and children, and the lack of funding for programs that might help them. They say the system gives us objective equality. Really, the system is blind to injustice. Property and capital are more important than people. Women and children do not have a dollar value.


Why is there no money for women in literacy?
– she might learn how to read + write
– women are not a priority
– the funders think it will be too expensive (babysitting, transportation etc)
– women's programs are the first too be cut in a recession
– we are told there isn't enough
– she might become powerful!
– military is more important
– she wouldn't be dependent on men
– government is wasteful + not accountable
– funders are men

Funding
Why is there no money for women in literacy?

The drawings and discussions they prompted facilitated our need to probe further for a clearer understanding of why these situations exist. Why are the structures that hold women back so strong? Why is it so difficult to bring about change? Why are women's lives the way they are?

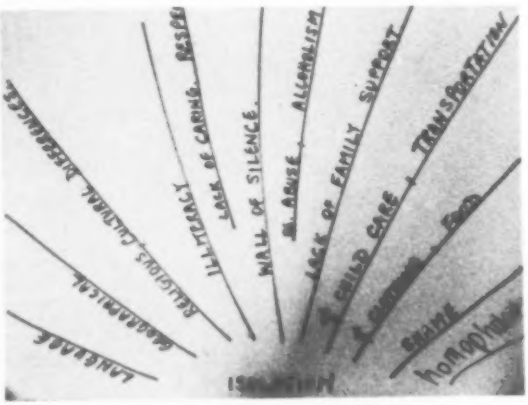
The women then identified key words or recurring themes that were represented in the drawings — poverty, guilt, self-esteem, funding, supports, validation, isolation, justice. Questions were developed for each key word to assist in further analysis of the theme. The women worked in pairs to answer the questions with each pair working on two themes. Some women listed their answers to the questions while others made fans.

Validation

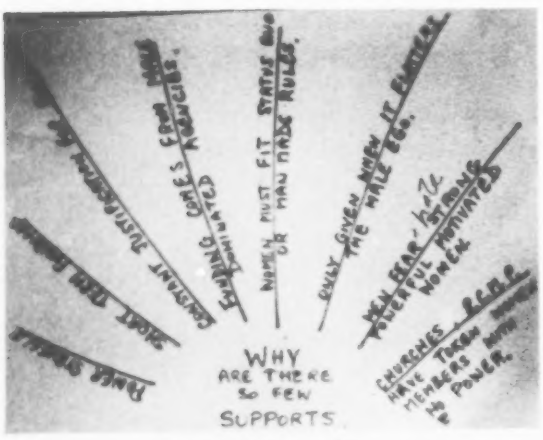
Why don't women feel validated?

- mothering isn't valued
- women are blamed for their abuse — revictimized
- as women we are objectified (media gives these messages)
- teaching literacy has less status than teaching GED math
- women are marginalized
- we don't see wealth and it's not possible for us (only for men in three-piece suits)
- educational or work needs are not important enough to provide daycare
- social service system assigns a monetary value to women's and children's needs
- when the cheque isn't much women feel they aren't worth much
- socialized role model of being the caregiver and not the receiver
- no one listens to women's and children's experiences of abuse
- politicians send a message through budget cuts — women's shelters, safety, childcare, basic needs, supports are least important

Why do women feel guilty when they do something for themselves?



Why are women so isolated?



Why are there so few supports for women?

Why do women who come to our programs have such low self-esteem?

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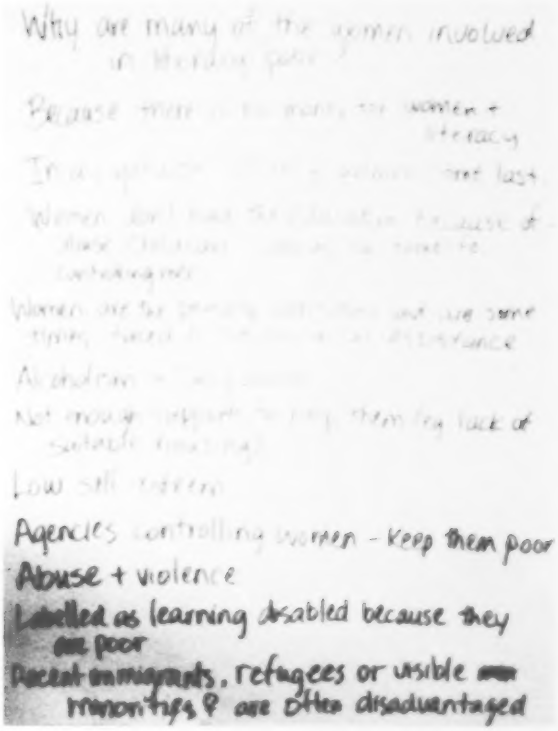

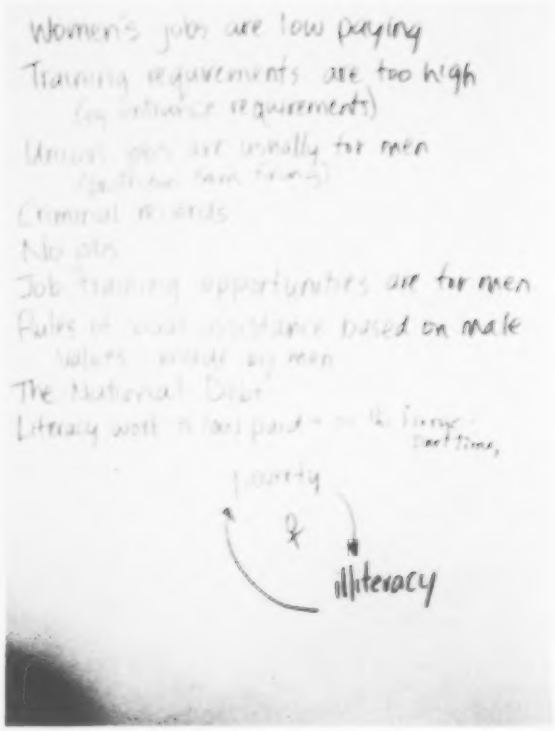

Justice

Why is there no justice for women?

- justice system is intimidating
- sexual orientation is not in the federal human rights code anywhere
- discretion of law is left to judges and who hires these judges?
- appointees are political and reflect a male-dominated system
- silence is taken as defiance or ignorance
- laws are biased against women, against culture
- more than 3/4 of judges, lawyers, police officers, etc., are male
- economic bias — bias against class
- women are revictimized when they do try to use the justice system
- no training for judges, police officers, lawyers in rights or issues of victims (women and children)
- laws protect rights of abuser not of victim — victims are barred from courtroom
- pool support for victims in the justice system (counselling, safety, financial)
- the justice system is racist and sexist
- judged based on literacy level — label people and base the judgement on this label

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The Documentation Group

Tannis Atkinson	Paula Davies	Diane Eastman
Wanita Koczka	Jeanne MacIntyre	Kate Nonesuch
Mary Ann Tierney	Betty-Ann Lloyd (facilitator)	Donna Truesdale (recorder)

This group began with each woman talking about her first response to the wide variety of documentation — descriptions, journal writing, articles, stories, booklets, policy work, and personal narratives. They talked about being absorbed, amazed, and overwhelmed by the quantity and quality of the work. They mentioned the many strong voices, the many similarities and differences, the many connections, and the gaps.

Several women said the material seemed very concrete, readable, and personal — reflecting a wide range of emotions and feelings. Each program seemed to emphasize a different aspect of their work so that we have a wonderful composite picture of the project. Others expressed their concern that we would have difficulty choosing the strongest image, in order for the final product to have the impact it deserves.

Most of the women believed that, despite the diversity, there were common threads that should be pulled out and made evident in the recommendations. "The recommendations seem to jump off the page," one woman said. Another said what is missing has to somehow make its way into the documentation as well. For example, some women believed the excellent literacy work accomplished during the project seemed invisible in many of the final products.

Women hoped that information from the interview transcripts and journals, from the less public documentation, might also be included in the final product. These materials have a richness that is not always evident when women have distilled their experiences for public consumption. "We have to show the process of change and development," one woman said. "These are the positive consequences of giving literacy workers the time and resources to get together and share their experiences."

By participating in this project many women have begun to look more closely at the devaluation of literacy work in particular and social justice work in general. Because of the support of other women, they have been able to express some of their feelings of bitterness and despair. Isolation continues to be one of the major problems for so many women — isolation and the devaluation of literacy work by those who have the power to change things.

The women in this group then decided to break into pairs or work on their own. They each focused on something that had caught their attention in terms of the documentation. They would spend the rest of the afternoon pulling together their different ideas. In the process, they highlighted how women with different interests and different perspectives find very different things in the same material.

The need for curriculum development

Many women had expressed an interest in following up this research project with some work on woman-positive curriculum development. Diane Eastman (Brandon Friendship Centre) and Wanita Koczka (Pine Grove Correctional Centre) went through the documentation, highlighting the different ways in which women had worked with curriculum over the last year.

Point one. **Write it the way you would say it.**

This point brings up the issue of different language for different purposes. We discussed how we talk to each other, the words we use when we talk to each other, and how we alter the speech pattern when speaking to different people. For example, we do not talk to a doctor in the same way that we talk to our friends. We use different words even when we are talking about the same thing to each of them.

In the same way, we have more than one writing style. We would make sure everything is absolutely correct on a letter to a potential employer. However, we would not care if a few commas were missing in a letter to a friend. In the first case, a business letter is being written and an impression is being made. In the second case, you are writing a letter to someone who knows you and is not going to be making decisions about you based on missing commas.

The brochure is being used by AMAC as an introduction of themselves to people who might wish to access their services. It should be inviting and warm. It should give information, but not overwhelm the reader. It should be personal. The words that the women chose to rewrite the brochure reflect this.

While dealing with this step we covered vocabulary, dictionary skills (to establish word meaning), context, use of the thesaurus (synonyms), and spelling. We also talked about why a conversational tone and the use of the word "you" would make the brochure more personal and inviting to a potential client.

Point two. **Use short words and sentences.**

This item led us into discussions about what constitutes a short word and a short sentence. The group decided that a short word should contain no more than two syllables. They agreed that there were some three syllable words that would not present a problem to a beginning reader, but words with one or two syllables should be used whenever possible. This decision was reached only after the group found out about syllables and how they join together to make words.

Fogg's Readability Scale was introduced to the group. We discussed what it was and why it was useful. The women decided that they did not want to become expert at using the scale because they couldn't see where it would be useful to them. They did say that knowing how the scale works helped them to understand why some material is harder to read.

This is a page from the appendix to Diane Eastman's policy paper. Here she outlines how she developed curriculum out of women's decision to rewrite a brochure for a service agency.

At Pine Grove, for example, LaVera Schiele talked about the importance of acknowledging how women want to begin with their own reality rather than something standardized in a text book. The instructor cannot understand that reality, however, unless she has managed to negotiate a relationship of trust with her students. Once that is in place, curriculum development becomes much more possible. Both she and the students then have the opportunity to learn as they share their experiences.

Diane Eastman (Brandon Friendship Centre) had included a curriculum guide in an appendix to the policy paper she wrote out of her experience in the research. She showed how women in her group identified their interest — re-writing a pamphlet for a service agency that works with adults molested as children — and how she worked with that interest to cover topics such as vocabulary, spelling, syllables, sentence structure, sequencing, and summarizing.

Several women used their journals to keep track of their curriculum development. Anne Moore (Action Read), Karen Bergman-Illnik (Arctic College), Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney (College of New Caledonia), and Nancy Steel (Keyano College) developed an almost week-by-week description of how they worked with women in their very different programs. As mentioned earlier, however, those journals never became public documentation. When they talked about their discoveries later that day, they recommended that all of that learning be recovered so we can share our wide variety of woman-positive approaches.

A series of themes

Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney (College of New Caledonia) had both been making notes of different issues as they read the documentation. They worked together at this workshop to make their list more comprehensive and to recognize where they found similar and dissimilar themes. They wanted to include not only the most evident themes, but also those that somehow remain hidden in the text. In the process, they said, they realized how easy it was to find themes that interested them. Pieces that had less meaning in their own programs took more effort to highlight. Later in the day, they presented their list to all the women.

Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney had already noted themes in the documentation before they arrived at the workshop. Here they consolidate their work and look for further issues.

- Good literacy work is woman-positive.
- Women literacy workers have a holistic sense of responsibility. We deal with more than the academic needs of our students.
- Because good woman-positive literacy work is holistic, literacy workers require funded time to develop such things as support services and curriculum.
- Women's literacy programs need to be validated by on-going stable funding that includes counsellors.
- What we discovered through this research needs to be translated into practical funding terms.
- We devalue our own work by not asking for — by not demanding — the dollars and space we need to provide good woman-positive literacy programing.
- This kind of research has many effects on the women involved. For example, the researcher can become the focus of the research, she can experience pain, difficulty, questioning, joy, hope.
- Being affiliated with CCLOW through this research gave us validation and permission for our work.
- Many women explored the relationship between feminist and woman-positive, and learner-centred. Some discovered that women-only is not necessarily woman-positive.
- Several women struggled with feminism as content. They came to realize that feminism must become more accessible.
- Violence is an almost overwhelming issue for women in literacy.
- Isolation is another overwhelming issue — isolation for women students, for women workers, for programs.
- The social aspect of learning is central for women.

- So many questions arise out of the different woman-positive activities. How can women take more ownership of their learning? Do they learn differently? When do they begin to talk about what they need in order to learn?
- Some of us seemed to set limits on our woman-positive literacy work. Did we distinguish between what we think should be done and what we actually ask for?
- There seem to be very few ways to evaluate the success of women's programs. What would be the qualitative and quantitative outcomes?

An administrator's perspective

Jeanne MacIntyre (Keyano College) decided she could contribute her ability to look at the documentation from an administrator's perspective. As someone who evaluates programs and recommends funding, she believed she had a point of view that was sometimes lacking in the project. She spent time trying to articulate her response of both respect and concern. When she talked about that process later in the day, many women nodded in agreement.

Jeanne MacIntyre worked on recommendations from her perspective as an administrator.

The intensity and commitment evident in the documentation had impressed Jeanne. She noted that although the process and structures were not always clearly defined, there were several commonalities. "This gives a measure of validity to the outcomes," she suggested, "since a variety of processes and a variety of participants came to common conclusions."

Jeanne recognized that she probably had an institutional bias because of her experience in these programs. She decided to look especially closely at the community-based projects. She realized that, as an outsider, she could not readily identify the vision and the plan behind the woman-positive activity. She wondered how a potential funder might be assured that a coherent or accountable process occurred. Echoing a theme that was mentioned elsewhere, she suggested that most funders will probably allocate money based on the final product that comes out of the project.

While she had no doubt that the research was valid, Jeanne suggested that her participation at two of the workshops and her support work for Nancy Steel had convinced her of that. She recommended that CCLOW recognize one of its roles as helping others become more aware of the potential of this kind of research. The organization needs to bridge the gap between what is apparent to those who already believe in the work and what is missing for those who remain unconvinced.

Power — Where do we see it, where is it hidden?

Tannis Atkinson (Toronto ALFA Centre) started out curious about the differences between community college programs and community-based programs. She tried to understand the different outcomes of their activities by looking at the different ways power was expressed. Beginning with her experience at Toronto ALFA Centre, where staff and students developed a sexual harassment policy, she tried to identify what was invisible in that program's documentation. Through that process, she thought she might be better able to think about what lay behind the pages of other programs' documentation. Of course, this is something we can't know — especially from the outside. What is missing for one woman will not be the elusive piece for another. In any event, Tannis said in her presentation, the ethics of this research doesn't allow us to make visible what others have decided should not be shown here.

Tannis ended by building a web chart illustrating how power and authority seemed to be expressed institutionally and through staff/staff and student/staff relationships. She included the ways that men staff and students have certain kinds of power over women students and staff. She looked at race and class privilege that crosses other boundaries.

Emotions

Kate Nonesuch (Malaspina College) decided to read through the documentation looking for different statements of emotion. She found over eighty-five different places where women used words that directly stated women's feelings. She listed the words and noted where they appeared and what they referred to. Happiness or elation topped the list. Other positive expressions of feeling included pride, excitement, love, fondness and friendship, and admiration. The second most common emotion was fear. Close behind were anger and frustration. Women also expressed sadness, self-blame, exhaustion, discomfort, disappointment, shock, and surprise.

Women were happy to be participating in woman-positive activities. Bonding as a group, welcoming new members, feeling part of a national network, team-teaching, creating woman-positive materials — all these experiences made women feel good about themselves, their work, their students, and co-workers. Sharing the wisdom of women's lives, working through conflicts about what might

or might not be woman-positive, writing reflective journals, and engaging in intense discussion also contributed to these feelings. Several different women mentioned the way in which women worked cooperatively in their activities as a source of elation for them.

Kate Nonesuch listed and categorized the different documentations of feelings on flip chart paper around the halls of one small group meeting space.

Women also expressed pride in their literacy work and in the achievement of learners. They were excited by students' participation, by feeling barriers fall and friendships form between staff and students. One woman expressed her love for the other women in her group. Another expressed admiration.

Women's fear and their perception of the fear of others was very strongly stated. Some women talked about the fear of violence and the fear of talking about violence. Some women talked about the fear of being thought feminist, of being identified with woman-positive work. Women participating in activities were afraid of their male partners' response to their increasing independence. Women not participating in activities were afraid of their male partners' response to their desire for independence. Some women's fear came out of changes in their own lives, including participation in this research. Other women's fears centred on the harassment and violence experienced in their programs.

Related to that fear was anger — anger at the conditions of women's lives, at men's effort to control women's lives, at the prevalence of prejudice in society, in programs, at home. Some students and staff were angry at those who participated in the woman-positive activities. Some were angry at the way their lives were controlled by welfare.

Related to fear and anger was frustration. Women talked about their frustration at having to curtail their participation in this project because of the way their lives were continually interrupted by their own and others' problems. Poverty, lack of childcare, lack of resources, space, support services, materials — women were frustrated at the lack of attention paid to the realities of women's lives.

Women felt sad sometimes because of their own or others' isolation. They realized the lack of support for women around mothering. In the face of women's stories of poverty, abuse, and helplessness, sadness was sometimes the only response possible.

They also experienced self-blame and self-doubt. Women's isolation led to internalizing the reasons for women's lack of resources. They wondered if they were actually deserting the men. They wondered if they were doing the research the way it was supposed to be done.

Women were exhausted by their work, burned out by the ongoing lack of funding, validation, support. They felt uncomfortable at the lack of privacy in their program, at the aggressive behaviour of some of the men. When colleagues were not supportive of the research, women felt let-down and disappointed.

Women experienced shock and surprise throughout their documentation of the research. In one program, a woman's boyfriend was murdered by her ex-husband. In another, women became acquainted with the common, everyday experiences of each other's lives. They were surprised by the positive experience of taking part in this project. They were surprised by women's inability to name a single woman role-model.

The Theatre Group

Karen Bergman-Illnik Debbie Heagy Alex Jones Dianne Palachik
LaVera Schiele Cathy Short Mary Snow Aisla Thomson
Alex Keir (recorder)

The women in the theatre group began Friday morning focusing on a central question in much of the documentation: Why is it hard for women to move from personal, individual growth to political action and structural change?

They talked about power and people's willingness, or lack of willingness, to change. They talked about the disruption involved in personal, political, and structural change. One woman said "Sometimes I wish I was just back where I used to be. But I'm not comfortable there any more either."

Someone else questioned why women have to justify their work by showing some kind of change beyond personal or individual growth. Political action, she said, has to begin in personal change. "The individual is a little dot. Everything spirals out from there." Some women noted that there are those who feel that personal change is the beginning of something, while others believe it is the end.

Feminist research is always labeled "personal," one woman noted. It's "just" about women. It's not about men. Other women added that feminist research is very much about men — but men don't want to recognize themselves in it. It's "only" about women's perception of men and that isn't enough. The men have to be the ones doing the perceiving to make it real and important.

Cathy Short uses body sculpture to display one of the feelings she found in the documentation.

Women talked about feminism and how threatening it can be to work from that position. They also talked about how powerful it can be.

> The whole word "feminism" scared the hell out of me! Now I see it was a seed that started to grow. Now I will say, "Because I'm a woman." That is very strong, I like that!

They also tried to sort out what it meant to be "political." Does political action only mean action protesting against governments or can it mean action for something?

> Once you start pushing the boundaries, that is political action. It's when you realize that it's not just about you, your life. It's moving from the individual to the collective. You take your personal analysis and apply it to the collective.

Women did not want to accept that being political was being reactive. They wanted to recognize the proactive possibilities.

> Why is hard to move between personal growth and political or collective action? Do we have to do something special, or can living our lives be a political action? We can change others through our own behaviour — do we have to act in a group for our work to become political? For many of us, how we raise our children is a political action. Our actions or our resistances make ripples and ripples become waves.

Women began to talk about how their discussion could become theatre.

> You reach out your hand and others may or may not take it. We can label ourselves in ways that make statements. We can make our isolation and our attempts at building community visible. What are the forces against us? Isolation, self-doubt, fear of failure, fear of change, fear of violence, fear of community backlash, and of homophobia.

One woman talked about how some of us are comfortable and don't want to move. Another added that women cannot grow in different directions if they are never given the chance to experience choices. Another suggested that one of the choices is to notice that some women are hungry. Then we have options. We can give them something to eat. We can say "I'm sorry you're hungry."

The people around you can hold you back, one woman said. You take on your friends' opinions. "Well, you can't change things anyway so why bother?" And

LaVera Schiele made her label — family responsibilities.

they are right. There may always be things that are not going to change. So much of the status quo won't change without revolution.

Women then looked at the relationship between political action and structural change. They identified lack of power, money, and political will as the major barriers to making structural change. The list of negatives seemed overwhelming, so they brainstormed some positive supports: friends, family, strength, clarity, self-esteem, awareness, literacy, confidence, other women, this project, our programs. They noted what would be positive if only it existed: childcare, transportation, space, community support.

Aisla Thomson, "self-esteem," chastises Cathy Short during a practice of the theatre piece.

As women began again to talk about the performance piece, they realized they needed to reflect the themes that they identified in the program documentation. They explored them through movement and body sculpture. They tried to make concrete the concept of political action as sisterhood. They returned again and again to the spiral as an image of women's growth and change. They used a candle to express growing awareness, enlightenment — how easily it can be extinguished and how willingly other women will move to relight it.

A few women worked with their ambivalence around the question. Why should we have to justify that we have done work that "only" leads to personal growth and change? Personal growth and change is a good enough beginning. Sometimes it is a good enough ending.

This transcript is taken from the video tape of the performance later in the day.

I

There are three parts to this presentation. The first part is about individual growth. Women move to the centre of the floor, make individual statements about personal growth and what that means to them. They then hold their places.

Karen	It's really being there — being strong and solid.
Debbie	It's freedom — freedom to make your <u>own</u> choices.
Alex	It's expressing it — feeling comfortable expressing it.
Aisla	It's clarity — being able to see things clearly.
Dianne	It's a voice — and a place for that voice to be heard.
Cathy	It's being there for her when she needs you.

LaVera It's trust — it's the first time I can trust someone.

Mary It's awareness — it's really knowing.

Some of the women rehearse the first section. From left in front, Cathy Short, Dianne Palachik, Karen Bergman-Illnik, Mary Snow, Aisla Thomson. In back, Alex Jones, Debbie Heagy.

II

The second part is about political action. Women come in one at a time, slowly making a line, holding hands and walking, until they form a spiral.

Alex I've been doing all this thinking, working in a literacy program. I feel like I'm developing all this awareness about women in the program. But I just don't know where to go from here.

Cathy Alex, thanks for all the help. My son's really happy that I'm doing his homework with him.

Debbie I guess maybe we do need some help from outside. We can't do it alone, we need money, we need help.

All three walk around, connected. As women join them, they continue to circle.

Aisla I see that this is really a community thing. I think that this whole thing is something bigger.

Dianne We have this wonderful network and I know just the person that we can call to make it happen.

LaVera I've got a great idea, let's call the government for funding. (Much laughter)

Mary Well I read your proposal and things look good, but funding. . . .

Karen comes in and stands outside the group

Karen I don't know if it's all that easy or not. I mean, do we always have to be going somewhere?

The group breaks up. Women hold their positions, facing in the same direction, but stopped.

III

The third part is about why it's hard to move from individual personal growth to political action and structural change. Women come onto the floor wearing labels, standing in a semi-circle.

Alex (Self-doubt) takes Cathy by the hand and takes her to Aisla (Self-esteem). Aisla walks with Cathy. When they pass Karen (Fear), she turns on Cathy with a belt, saying in an angry voice, "What do you think you're doing?"

Aisla backs away. Alex comes back in to Cathy. Then Mary (Support) joins them and walks with Cathy to Dianne (Voice) who hands her a lit candle.

Cathy walks over to Debbie (Literacy) who hands her a book. "Why don't you try this? It's a literacy program." LaVera (Family responsibilities) comes over and angrily throws the book down. "You can't do this. Who will take care of the kids?"

Alex walks over and blows out the candle. Shirley (from outside) reaches in and relights it.

Sharing our work

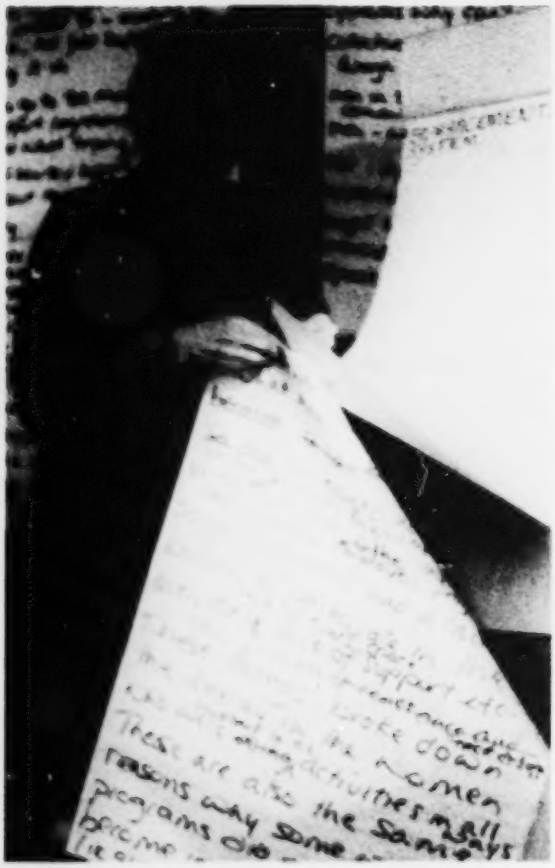
When we came together after working in these three groups all day, women sat and lay down around the edges of the room. We looked at the drawings and fans as women talk about the meanings behind the images. We heard the women from the documentation group talk about their exploration of words and meanings. The women from the theatre group then presented their performance piece as Alex Keir, their recorder, videotaped it.

We stayed very, very quiet after the performance. A few women then talked about how seeing the words and images acted out brought them close to tears. Others talked about the theatre group's questions. Why would we — how could we — separate personal growth from political action? Can there be structural change or group action if each of us has not had a chance to work through our own hopes and fears? Does our funding require us to undervalue women's individual growth through literacy or through research? Why do we always have to search for

ways to quantify our experiences? How can we, in the documentation for this research, show the extent of the change in individual women, groups of women, and programs in a way that does not suggest one achievement is better than another?

We had no answers for these difficult questions. Instead, we recognized the commonalities in the three different pieces of work, applauded each other's efforts, and made a wide variety of plans for the evening.

On Saturday morning we gathered into three somewhat different groups. As much as possible we tried to provide space for women with similar political or philosophical perspectives to work together. Jenny Horsman and Michele Kuhlman facilitated one group of women who worked closely together using an informal discussion format. Frances facilitated women who began as one group, broke into smaller groups to work with individual questions, and then shared their responses. I facilitated women who spent some time in general discussion about the questions and then began a series of rounds answering each question in turn. The recorders typed women's words into the computers as they spoke. Sometimes the flow of the discussion was recorded on flip chart pages as well.



We generated a lot of flip chart paper on Saturday. Jenny Horsman tries to keep things straight in her group.

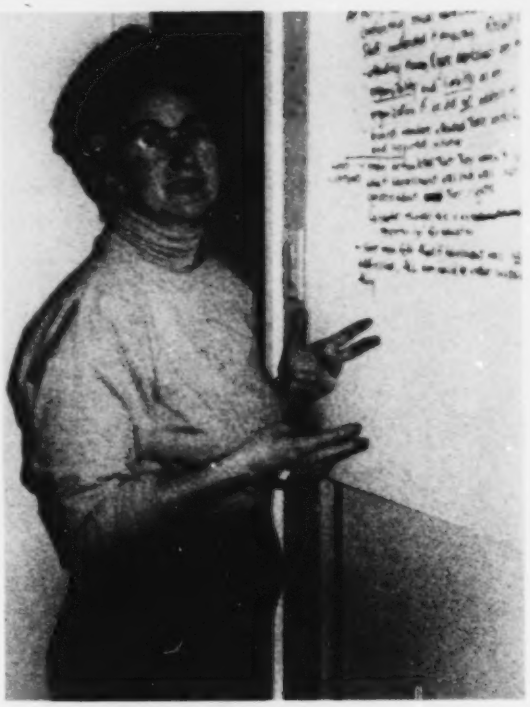
We had planned to have time to share the three groups' responses to the analysis questions after lunch. However, we all decided we needed more time to complete our work. In the afternoon, it became clear that the three groups wanted to move at their own pace. Two groups decided to continue with their recommendations, finishing before supper. The third decided to take a break and work on their recommendations in the evening. Everyone would post the results so we could review them in the morning.

After breakfast on Sunday we walked around the room reading the recommendations. Each group had a different style, but the focus and emphasis seemed remarkably clear. The recommendations addressed immediate, critical needs (such as stable, adequate funding; implementing sexual harassment and anti-racism policies), long-term planning (such as coalition building with community-based services; more effective training for literacy workers), and fundamental changes in understanding (such as acknowledging the devaluation of women's work, of adult literacy work, of social justice work). They formed an impressive vision of a woman-positive future.

Frances and I talked about the process for editing the collaborative analysis and recommendations. After the workshop we would print the recorders' work and transcribe the flip charts. We would compile and distribute these unedited responses to all the women. As they returned the pages, we would add their agreement, disagreement, and general comments to the original recordings.

Then, after we received the final funding for the project, we would work with Tannis Atkinson to develop a draft text which would be sent to all the women from the third workshop. Again, their disagreements or comments would be included in the final document. These analysis statements and recommendations appear in Chapter 5 of this book.

At two different times during the workshop, Tannis facilitated a discussion on the final documentation for the project. Most women said we needed to include the descriptions of the communities, programs, and woman-positive activities, including what happened because of those activities. We needed to provide a context for understanding the work. Several women said we should publish all the different program products, that they would be useful for a wide variety of readers. Others emphasized the importance of the interviews, the places where so many women talked with clear and focused energy about their work. One woman talked about how they provide a springboard for the rest of the work because they are pieces of "live thinking."



Tannis Atkinson facilitated our discussions about final documentation.

One woman talked about the importance of having something accessible, something that would invite people in to read different pieces at different times. Some women emphasized that readers should be able to see how the research was done. They should know that we made our discoveries through a lot of hard work, reflection, discussion, and analysis.

There seemed to be a strong consensus that the final product should be useful for literacy programs first of all. Literacy workers and students should be able to read what happened and think about what might be possible within their own programs. Women also wanted something that would arouse the curiosity of women's organizations and agencies, policy makers, and academics.

I talked about how we would develop the documentation for the research process. I would write a draft and incorporate feedback from Frances, Tannis, and Aisla. All the women involved in the research — including CCLOW staff and advisory committee members — would receive copies of this document. Everyone would have the right to have their names, the names of their programs, and any

identifying details changed. If they disagreed with a description or interpretation of part of the process, their objection and own interpretation would be included.

We then went through a process of brainstorming and discussion around possible names for the different pieces of documentation. Those names would be compiled and sent out for additions and for comment. Women agreed that the poster should be called "Discovering the strength of our voices" to provide a link between phase one and phase two.

Finally it was time to say goodbye. Somewhat reluctantly we gathered the different small crystals and candles that Dianne had brought us. We put the crystals in a beautiful bowl of water. We had one last round, talking about our experience during the project. Then each of us lit our candles from the candle flame of the woman beside us. We went to the centre, chose a crystal from the bowl and returned to our seats. Throughout this time, the whole group sang:

> We are the flow, we are the ebb
> We are the weavers, we are the web

After a moment we blew out our candles and prepared to return home.

Of course, we completed evaluations of the workshop! Again, working with large numbers of very diverse women resulted in the same kinds of contradictions as had been present in the evaluations of the other two workshops. What had been the highlight for some women was the least useful for others.

Everything that went up on the walls had to come down. Gail Lanoie helps clear up.

Most felt their small group work was most satisfying. Some missed meeting with a wider variety of women, but they agreed it had been a very effective process — particularly when they saw the similarity of results from each group. One woman wrote about the pressure to agree, to not challenge other women. She felt that our success should be defined by the nature of the work that we accomplished not by the strength of the bond we developed.

As expected, several women felt they did not have enough time to feel finished. A few felt that in the rush to do the work, some women's feelings were trampled or they felt excluded. Another woman suggested, "It is sometimes necessary to not allow everyone to have a say. Momentum gets lost." There was a striking contrast between women who felt that they had control over the development of the analysis and those who felt they lacked real control. One woman expressed concern that she was "being both a subject and a researcher."

Most women wrote that they had as much involvement as they wanted in the analysis of what happened in this project. A few suggested that they were given too much involvement. They would have preferred to have Frances and me draft an analysis that they would then respond to. Others felt that the key to the collaborative analysis was that Frances and I did not express strong interpretations during the sessions and they, therefore, felt very free to present their own. Some women felt that having the documentation for a longer period of time before the workshop would have increased their sense of involvement. Several added that they wanted the opportunity to comment on all the material that contained information about them before we published anything.

Perhaps the strongest consensus came from women's appreciation of the recorders' work and the way in which they quickly became integrated into the group. One woman described the effectiveness of "getting everyone's opinion and having it recorded. Nothing was left out, nothing said was unimportant." Linda Dale, Alex Keir, and Donna Truesdale received a strong vote of confidence and thanks.

5

Collaborative analysis/ Recommendations

It is impossible to define exactly when we started the analysis of our experience in this project. When we came into the project, we already had some understanding of why things happen the way they do. By participating in the research process, we had a chance to reflect on those understandings, to observe our work from a different perspective.

At the second workshop we engaged in intense and wide-ranging discussions about many of the issues women had identified over the last six months. In Frances's session with the web charts, women made some concrete connections among these issues. During the second interview we looked at some of those connections as the beginning of our collaborative analysis. When women identified the three issues that they had become most aware of during the research process, most responded out of their awareness of what had happened across the country.

By the time we came to the third workshop we had almost all the program documentation. We put together our interpretations of the documentation the first full day. The second full day we developed analysis statements that were later edited and categorized, then approved by the women who attended the workshop.

All these activities contributed to our collaborative analysis. They are included here with the project recommendations that provide a framework for further action.

5-1 The web charts from the second workshop

An outline of the first web chart appears in Chapter Three of this book. Two more appear here. Although many of the issues raised were similar, each web reflects the experiences of the women involved in building it. For example, while each of the groups identified violence in women's lives as a central issue, how that issue was expressed is very different.

In the second group, violence was first named as abuse and powerlessness. One woman talked about a group of men who were breaking into women's homes and terrorizing them. She pointed out that professionals often blame the women

Aboriginal women
Left more powerless
If they were breaking into coop that would be stopped
How maturity has been delayed/ stopped and students can't handle things in an adult fashion
stopped developing when abuse started
women often gets blamed for this by professionals
Group of men going around in community breaking in and terrorizing women
feel powerless everyday in work - I'm overworked, desperate and I've come to accept that as part of my work. But work is inspiring
source of desperation - can't guarantee women or me won't get raped
women come to accept this as a way of life
abuse is not just a women's issue - it's a person issue
What about the men?
Question by the men - Why are we left out?
Questions: How do you deal with this? How do you feel? Do you feel adequate
Abuse/violence/ powerlessness
we do support people in crisis - can't help people deal with the system - one step at a time
we heard you talk about abuse and "can't we join you for that discussion because we have been abused as children
Do women's groups in programs cause men to reflect on their lives too (i.e. men in program having similar discussion)
Issues
Space — a room of one's own/corporeality — recognition of the importance of the group
get feeling nobody cares about what we do - no space, Low pay, etc.
some do get challenged by professionals - some don't/ generally professionals not very helpful
counsellors non existent unless you have money or can tell on a man
some women in our group went to local transition house for counselling - stuff these alienated some women
social workers can't help you - those who experienced it can
what's adequate?
willingness to believe, support, accept - if you have that you're qualified
okay for first step of getting it out and support. then I don't feel I have the skills to help them move on and I need to refer women
Every woman in program is there because schooling was interrupted or didn't exist because of abuse
Labeled at some point as developmentally handicapped - that is a label for abuse - developmentally handicapped women abused more often
most in program have been sexually abused as children and adults — groups want to talk about this
Lifelong sexual/emotional abuse — big thing is wanting to talk, break out of this
Is therapy a class thing? women might start but not carry through
Labels
Doing women's issues work = feminist = lesbian
How do people see me?
we have to be mindful of where people are at
we got to remember that each person is at a different Level of risk - but we have to accept they might not be able to or want to move
Power
I do have more power than my students - how to use it in a positive way without abusing it
Research
some rejection of program has to do with denial in own lives
when there's a whole lot of people in denial then you're the one who is wrong

for this — somehow, it's their fault. If those same men were breaking into businesses, however, it would be stopped immediately.

Another woman said that every woman in her program had been abused and that the abuse had significantly interfered with their schooling. Many of these women have been labelled developmentally disabled — as if that is a label for abuse. Other women said most of the participants in their programs had been emotionally, physically, and sexually abused in the past and that the abuse continues now. This has become an important issue for the programs involved because women often need to talk about their experience before they can break free of it. The literacy worker may be the only person that she trusts.

One of the women in this session asked several questions. How do you deal with this? How do you feel? Do you feel adequate? These questions prompted another to ask, "What's adequate?" A discussion then followed about the lack of affordable, accessible community agencies for women and the often untrained or unprepared staff in the agencies that do exist.

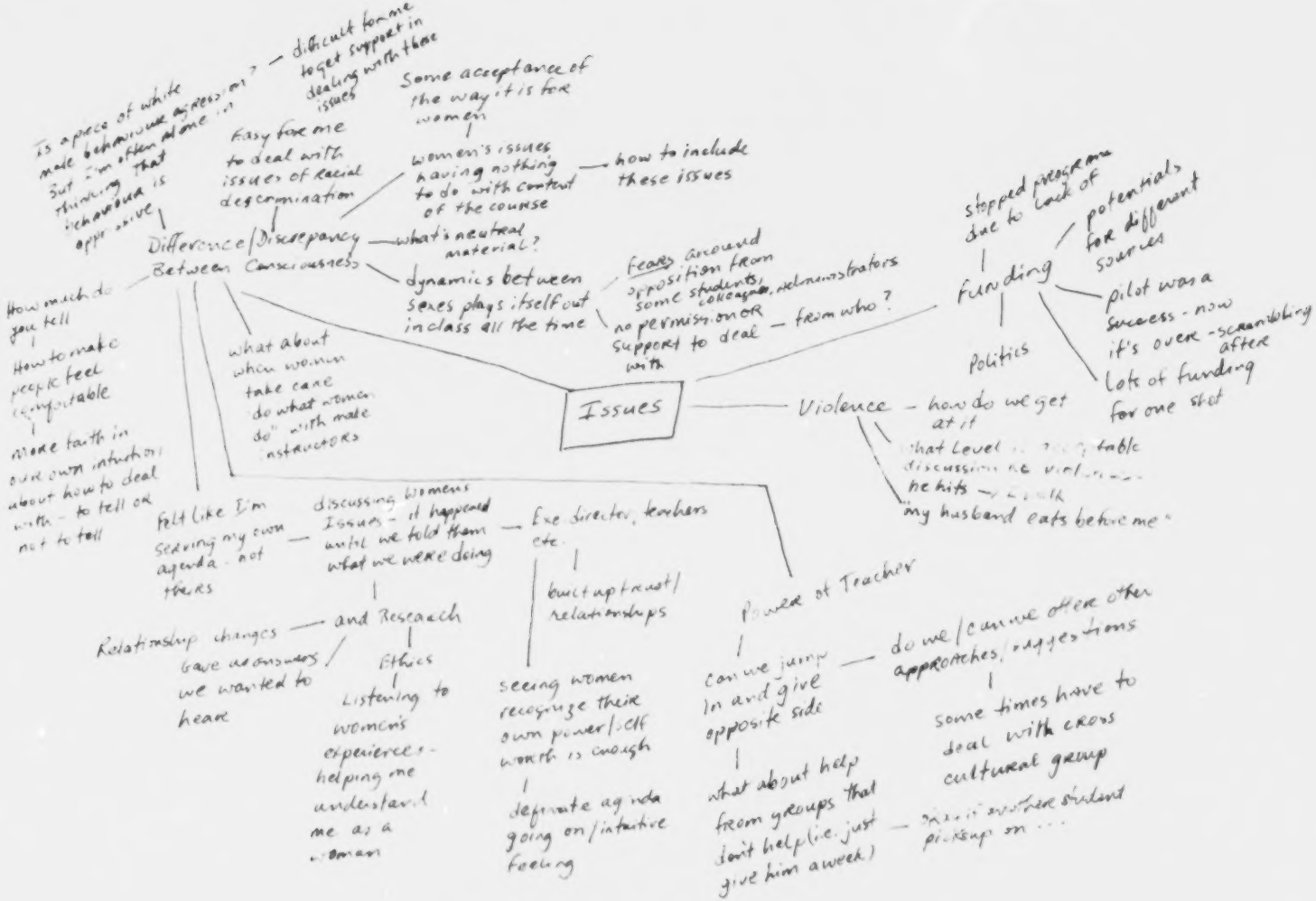
Women acknowledged that those who experienced abuse may be the most effective at helping others take the first steps of healing. Some women felt they didn't have the skills required to help the women move beyond that point. They wanted access to good counselling services. Others felt that anyone is qualified to help if they are willing to believe, support, and accept what the women say.

As can be seen in the completed web charts on the opposite page and next page, many other issues arose — issues of inadequate space, men's questions about their exclusion from groups discussing abuse, the differences in power between instructors and students, labeling, and how women who work on women's issues are perceived by others.

In the third group, women began discussing how they might facilitate women's disclosure of violence. Some women said they often know women in their programs are experiencing violence, but they don't know how to raise the issue if the women involved don't mention it first. Others questioned how far they should go in directing or commenting on statements made by students in the classroom.

Much of the discussion focused on the differences between teacher and student interpretations of the same event. One woman said she is often the only person in her classroom to interpret white male behaviour as aggression. This stimulated further discussion about how instructors can introduce women's issues into the classroom when these issues are not considered appropriate course content.

Some women said that they have no permission or support to question classroom dynamics between men and women students. This led participants to wonder whose agenda would be served by such questions — the teacher's or the students'? They asked who might be expected to give them permission and support? How much do they want to tell those in more powerful positions about what they are doing?


Issues
Difference/Discrepancy Between Consciousness
Is a piece of white male behaviour aggression? But I'm often alone in thinking that behaviour is aggressive
difficult for me to get support in dealing with these issues
Easy for me to deal with issues of racial discrimination
Some acceptance of the way it is for women
women's issues having nothing to do with content of the course
how to include these issues
what's neutral material?
dynamics between sexes plays itself out in class all the time
fears around opposition from some students, colleagues, administrators
no permission OR support to deal with
from who?
How much do you tell
How to make people feel comfortable
make faith in our own intuition about how to deal with - to tell or not to tell
what about when women take care do what women do" with male instructors
felt like I'm serving my own agenda - not theirs
discussing Womens Issues - it happened until we told them what we were doing
Exe director, teachers etc.
built up trust/ relationships
Relationship changes
and Research
gave us answers we wanted to hear
Ethics
Listening to women's experiences - helping me understand me as a woman
seeing women recognize their own power/self worth is enough
definate agenda going on/intuitive feeling
Power of Teacher
can we jump in and give opposite side
what about help from groups that don't help (i.e. just give him a week)
do we/can we offer other approaches/suggestions
some times have to deal with cross cultural group
Violence
how do we get at it
what level ... table discussion re violence
he hits
my husband eats before me"
Politics
Funding
stopped program due to lack of
potentials for different sources
pilot was a success - now it's over - scrambling after
Lots of funding for one shot

Other issues identified by this group included underfunding for literacy programs, women's concerns about their children, the ethics of doing the research, and the effects of labelling.

5-2 The significant issues identified in the second interview

During the second interview we asked women to name three issues that seem more, or most, significant because of their participation in this project. Despite their different experiences, the responses to the question overlapped and often seemed to build on each other. They reflected some of the most intense discussions at the second workshop and indicated a distinct move from reflection and discussion about their own activities to an interpretation and analysis of the project as a whole.

• Violence against women

One after another, women involved in this research talked about the ways in which their work is affected by both the reality and the threat of men's violence against women. They talked about the pervasiveness and magnitude of violence in women's lives — the lives of students and the lives of staff. They also discovered and rediscovered the ways in which the threat or the reality of men's violence stops women from participating in adult literacy and basic education programs.

Women mentioned the experience of women who had been sexually harassed and abused in the public school system and how that affected their learning then and their learning now. Others emphasized the importance of distinguishing child sexual assault and sexual harassment from other forms of violence.

Three women had classes in which every woman present had been sexually abused as a child. One woman suggested that program workers have a particular responsibility to seek healing from their own experiences of abuse.

> Because, if we're going to deal with it with [students], we're going to have to deal with it ourselves, in our own lives. We can't separate it. You just can't separate it out, how terribly sad and emotional it is. (Karen Bergman-Illnik, Arctic College)

One woman talked about the many dimensions of violence against women that she must respond to as a teacher. Both women students and other staff are often dealing with current or past abuse or the threat of abuse. Some of the men students are known to be abusers.

> This last is a big issue for me. . . . Right now I have a man in my class with whom I have been working for several months on reading and writing. I

The issues identified during the second interview

- violence against women
- poverty
- discrimination
- isolation
- devaluation of women's work in literacy
- tensions between community-based and woman-positive work
- the need for holistic, learner-centred work
- the incredible diversity and similarity of women who work in the field of adult literacy and basic education.

have a relationship with him. I like him. I give him lots of encouragement about the work he is doing. Last weekend his partner went to the hospital with a broken nose and other injuries after he beat her. How do I face him when he comes back? (Kate Nonesuch, Malaspina College)

The prevalence of sexual harassment, even sexual assault, within programs became a major theme for many women — as did the importance of the research as an opportunity to name this violence. At least one woman experienced men's violence as a result of her participation in this research. Others experienced the threat of violence or the fear of violence as they became vocal about the importance of woman-positive activities within their programs.

Many women talked about how the connections between women, violence, and literacy are so visible in some programs and so hidden in others. For some, the violence inside their programs mirrors the way violence stalks women on the streets, in their homes, and at work. For others, the invisibility of violence inside their programs mirrors the way violence against women is ignored or denied within their communities and institutions.

• Poverty

The terrible poverty of many women students, particularly those who receive social assistance and those without any form of income, became a central theme. Many women recognized poverty as a systemic form of violence against women. The lack of resources and services for women who are hungry, homeless, sick, or disabled results in terrible stress not only for the women themselves, but also for the workers who become involved in trying to help women simply live their lives. Again, for some program workers this poverty and its consequences may be invisible because women denied a minimum standard of living either never appear in classrooms or silently drop out.

• Discrimination

Some women focused on the violence of systemic racism, sexism, ablism, and homophobia within their programs and throughout society. The lack of training for practitioners and the lack of program policies and procedures to deal with discrimination became a catalyst for woman-positive activities in two programs. They developed sexual harassment policies as the basis for anti-discrimination policies. Others plan to use these processes and models to implement their own.

• Isolation

Many women talked about how they felt isolated in their work. They stressed the importance of having two women in each program involved in the research. The experience of working through the practice, reflection, and analysis process with a partner, as well as with other women from across the country, had

demonstrated the power of having time, resources, and encouragement to explore their work.

One woman suggested that women are isolated for many reasons, but women often remain isolated because of fear, the fear of men's response to women seeking out the company of other women. Another said that overcoming that isolation is the only way to overcome the fear.

Another woman said that we must insist on the social nature of learning for women, including women who are staff. Several women talked about the importance of women workers forging links with other women — particularly those working in transition houses and anti-poverty movements.

• Devaluation

Women often talked about the lack of personal, political, and professional support for their work. One woman suggested this lack of support is evident not only in the attitudes and behaviour of funders and other agencies and organizations, but also in the way we treat ourselves. She suggested that, as workers, we need to recognize the importance of meeting our own needs.

> The way I am, I always thought of the learners, I always wanted to put them first. But as time went on, it wasn't perfectly all right. Because if staff are not taken care of, how can staff do a good job with the learners? I feel like there should be a balance there. (Cathy Short, Rabbittown Learners Program)

For some women, the connection between women's work as literacy instructors and women's work as caregivers in other spheres became more apparent. They identified "women's work" in classrooms or in community-based programs as similar to "women's work" as mothers, wives, nurses, social workers. They feel that, as women, they are often drawn into the social and emotional lives of their students in ways that men are not. One woman suggested that it is this unrecognized but essential work that leads to burn-out.

One woman talked about the "crisis fog" that contributes to a lack of vision for the future, another cause of burn-out. If we focus all our time on ever-present crises, there is no time left for visionary planning. Accepting that it is impossible to do more than deal with the present moment seems to be both a consequence and a cause of devalued work.

> We're convinced that we don't have time, that our reflections aren't that important, and maybe our work isn't that valuable or doesn't have much impact on people. It's all the different layers of devaluing that come along with the crisis fog and stop us from thinking. (Anne Moore, Action Read)

When we began to talk about the kinds of resources that would indicate their work was no longer devalued, women mentioned full-time jobs in stable programs with basic health benefits; time and energy for professional development; enough

space to work privately and with dignity; curriculum materials that represent women's different lives in realistic and respectful ways; women's safe, affordable access to childcare, transportation, housing.

• Tensions between community-based and woman-positive work

Several women raised the issue of working in programs where all the staff and students face incredible demands on their time and resources. One woman wondered how community-based programs can justify doing woman-positive work. She felt she would have to rationalize taking time and resources from "students" in order to give them to "women." Other women continued to struggle with the question of how woman-positive work, particularly work with women-only groups, is related to work with men-only groups and mixed-sex groups.

Some women emphasized the importance of exploring the similarities and differences between "woman-positive" and "feminist" work in adult literacy. Others wanted to make it clear how, as Mary Snow (Saint John Learning Exchange) said,

> Being a woman is not about "not being a man." Being a woman, working with women, is not about men. It is not about hating men or excluding men. It is about women.

• The need for holistic, learner-centred work

Many women identified the holistic nature of adult literacy work as a central theme during the research process. Recognizing the complexity of literacy work included, for many women, recognizing the adult students' right to be involved in the decision-making processes that determine how programs are run. Doing woman-positive activities has to include giving all the women involved significant control over what happens. "If we are going to work with women, we need to work from them not for them," said Diane Eastman (Brandon Friendship Centre). Given the systemic discrimination in our society, this includes consciously finding and implementing more inclusive ways of working with women.

• The incredible diversity and similarity of women working in adult literacy and basic education

Woman after woman talked about the ways in which the same issues seemed to arise across the twelve programs involved in the research. Recognizing the significance of these similarities confirmed or reaffirmed for most women the understanding that we share issues as women, despite our differences. As one woman said, the incredible diversity of the women working with women has to be something that we all learn to respect and celebrate.

The questions used to develop analysis statements

- Why did some programs and women decide to become involved in this research?
- Why did some programs and women decide not to become involved in this research?
- Why did the programs and women who became involved choose their particular activities?
- Why were some programs and women able to do what they wanted?
- Why were some programs and women not able to do what they wanted?
- Why were the good days good?
- Why did change happen?
- Why would we suggest that others do their own woman-positive activity?
- Why would some women not want or not be able to do woman-positive activities?

5-3 Analysis statements from the third workshop

During the second day of the third workshop, women met in three different groups to answer a series of questions beginning with the word "Why." We did not share our answers to these questions during the workshop. Instead, we used our experience of answering them to put together recommendations later in the day.

The answers to the analysis questions were compiled, without editing, after the workshop. They were sent to all the women for further comments. Based on these comments, Frances worked at combining and categorizing the analysis statements. Tannis gave feedback and I then wrote them into a draft which was sent to everyone for comment. These final comments have been included in the analysis statements outlined below. As much as possible we have used the actual words of women recorded during the workshop.

• Why did some programs and women decide to become involved in this research?

How the programs came into the research is easier to describe than why women in these particular programs expressed interest and why women in other programs that heard about phase one did not.

For some of us, the project came at the right "action" moment. Our programs were ready for change. Being involved in a national research project gave us the personal and political support of other women and it gave our work with women credibility within our programs. This was especially true for those of us who wanted to deal with ongoing incidents of sexual harassment and/or violence within our programs.

Those of us who work in programs with community-based, learner-centred, or humanistic philosophies often face resistance to grouping students according to distinctive identities, needs, or interests. The research gave us a chance to "experiment" with something that did not necessarily have to become part of our programs' mandates.

Many women involved in literacy want and need a women's community within which they can explore woman-positive or feminist work. Some of us wanted the intellectual stimulation of the research while others wanted to explore certain kinds of literacy practice working with women. A few were primarily interested in taking part in innovative research

The strongest impetus for many of us was the opportunity to reflect on our practice within our programs and with other women across the country. Over the year this reflection and connection became an even more important aspect of the research.

Several women felt very strongly that their involvement in the research would broaden their understanding of the kinds of literacy work being done in different parts of the country and in different kinds of programs. A few of us felt that our programs would provide others with a valuable and different perspective on adult literacy work.

This project gave us an opportunity to participate in something that explicitly worked toward the equality of women. We felt less isolated because we were connected on a national basis at the same time that we were rooted in our local perspective. Since a significant number of participants were able to provide something specifically for women within their programs, it gave women students as well as workers an opportunity to actively participate in research and to share experiences with women in other parts of Canada.

• Why did some programs and women decide not to become involved in this research?

Obviously, we cannot know for sure why many of the programs and women who knew about the research decided not to become involved. However, from our own experiences and from discussions with others, we believe that many women simply didn't have the support they would need within their program or within their community and families to take on this kind of project.

Based on the research design, the programs had to agree to sponsor the woman-positive activity. Many would not have the funding, staff, space, or energy to make this project a priority. Others might not want to risk the structural and attitudinal changes that might be required if they focused on the experiences of women students and staff. Some programs might have been confused about, or antagonistic toward, the term "woman-positive." It might have seemed too closely connected to "feminism" or to the activities of white, middle class women.

The women interested in becoming involved might not have had decision-making power in their programs. They might have faced resistance from other workers or from students, particularly men workers or students.

• Why did the programs and women who became involved choose their particular activities?

Several programs already had women-only groups or classes and women in those programs wanted an opportunity to build on these existing activities and strengths. They wanted a chance to focus on the consequences of doing these activities.

Some of us wanted change in our programs and chose our activity as a place to start. Some of us wanted to explore different options for change in ourselves and

in our professional practice. We chose activities that would facilitate that exploration. And some of us simply wanted to challenge the sexism we recognized in our students, in our co-workers, and in ourselves.

The research provided an opportunity to test something new or to reflect on what was already happening. While most of us chose activities that we thought would work within the existing philosophy and mandate of our programs, others tested something new, challenging the practice in our programs.

• Why were some programs and women able to do what they wanted?

Our activities went forward because we had skills, courage, and the ability to strategize and organize. Women in literacy are used to taking initiative and control as much as possible within programs. We learn to be tough and to survive.

Many of us had the kind of personal credibility that gives us a power-base from which to work. Others had the support and involvement of women who were decision-makers and that allowed us to build on our own credibility. A few of us had administrative power in our programs — either as members of a collective or as part of a hierarchy — and we were able to implement our activities because of that power.

Some activities appeared to be organic outgrowths of already existing activities. They went forward fairly smoothly because they formed a natural progression of what was already happening. This made them acceptable as parts of the core program. Other activities responded to a need that was so clear that it overrode resistance.

Those of us who did activities outside the core curriculum or as volunteers did not require the same kinds of permission as women who wanted to do something that would change the foundation or funding of their programs. Some programs — and women — are so marginalized within institutions that what we do does not come under a great deal of scrutiny.

Much of what happened was not expected and we needed a combination of structural and personal opportunities to be flexible. Some of us were simply lucky that our activities did not get the wrong kind of attention.

For several activities, team-teaching provided a great deal of support, as did the time and money to reflect on what was happening. A few programs actually encourage risk-taking and new activities. Others have the resources to support new activities.

For many of us, however, our strong vision of what we wanted to work toward set a clear political agenda and helped to frame our activities and move them forward. The support of other women in the research reduced our isolation and gave us the energy to continue.

However we worked within our programs, it was a complex process involving many different people and situations. Administrative and peer support, the interest of students, sufficient funding, and program stability and flexibility — they all seem necessary, though some of us managed to go forward even when these necessities were lacking.

• Why were some programs and women not able to do what they wanted?

Some of the woman-positive activities did not proceed as planned. Others changed direction at different times during the research process. We want to understand why some of us were not able to do what we wanted. We also want to recognize that in those programs where the research shifted focus, good literacy worked continued throughout the project.

A few of us believe that we did not have a strong enough vision. We entered into our activities without being clear enough about the possible consequences. This seems particularly true when we consider the ways in which we did, or did not, include students in the decision-making.

In some programs, students were not used to having the power to decide on their activities. In community college programs, students are often not used to having input into decisions about administration or programming policy, even though they may have considerable influence in curriculum. This lack of experience in being consulted around program decisions led to certain negative power dynamics — particularly in one situation where white men dominated the discussions.

Women's personal lives — especially our lack of time to spend on ourselves — limited the kinds of risks we are able to take. This was true for women students as well as staff. A lack of encouragement from partners, families, or friends often makes it very difficult to continue with activities that we define as positive for ourselves as women. There can be a stigma attached to participating in women-only activities, in particular, that is hard to overcome if we feel isolated. Sometimes we may not feel isolated, we simply cannot spare the time or the money for childcare or transportation.

Some women did not have the support of even one other participant. A few of us in this situation were able to carry on. Others felt too isolated and vulnerable on several different levels. We found it difficult to do woman-positive activities without support and impossible to make the kinds of structural program change needed in order to get that support.

Lack of support from co-workers was sometimes difficult, particularly when the co-workers agreed theoretically with the project, but were not able to put that theory into practice. Women especially could not go forward, could not risk too much, when they were unable to confront their co-workers.

Some of us discovered that our programs seemed "worker-centred" rather than "learner-centred." Staff in these programs resisted practices that made the program more accessible to women students because these changes resulted in inconvenience or a shift in focus from working conditions to learning conditions.

Staff and students in other programs seemed to resist activities that challenged them in terms of their sexism, classism, racism, ablism. In a few programs with mixed classes of men and women, the power of the men's sexism over-rode the power of the woman teacher. We often found it very difficult to fight this sexism directly.

Simply stated, men's violence — both the threat and the reality of men's violence — made it difficult for some of us to initiate or continue doing woman-positive work.

Programs and women may not have had the money, space, or childcare needed to go forward with their work. The lack of suitable, affordable childcare is a major limit on what we are able to do. It seems essential that we recognize that one or two women in a program cannot fight the whole societal issue of childcare — or other woman-negative circumstances.

• Why were the good days good?

The good days were good because we were persistent, determined, and worked hard. Whatever was happening in the lives of women staff and women students, in the lives of women in our communities, influenced what happened in our activities. Mostly, the good days were good because we were in the right place at the right time with the necessary resources and energy to make the best of being women together. We have a long list of what women said about our experience of good days —

- Good days happened when women could be there because no one had been raped, no one had been the victim of other kinds of violence in their lives. When women had enough food and a place to sleep we had good days.
- Good days happened when women momentarily forgot fear and were open to new ideas.
- Good days happened when there was good weather and women came to class feeling good about themselves. That means we have better reading, better discussions.
- Good days happened because we were able to truthfully talk about our lives in our own way. We crafted our own community with our stories.
- Good days happened when we were talking around a kitchen table — telling our own stories in our own voices about our own lives. We were talking about "issues." We talked about condoms, chocolate cake, someone changing her life. We helped each other.

- Good days happened when the women in our activity understood what we were trying to do.
- Good days happened when we could experience breaking down the barriers between learners and instructors and, therefore, we felt at home in the class.
- The good days happened when we had the childcare we needed, because other staff did not interrupt us, because we had the space we needed to do our work.
- Good days happened when we had enough time to plan.
- Good days meant good literacy work was being done. Students came to class for themselves, to express themselves, to say something that was not an assignment. We could see that we were creating a good environment for women because of this project .
- When we had co-workers who could help with crisis, we had good days.
- Good days happened because some of us challenged our own understandings of feminism both inside and outside the classroom. For some of us, this was particularly true when the "f" word surfaced in class. For others of us, the surfacing of the "f" word meant a bad day!
- Good days happened when we were able to share food, to feel support from our colleagues.
- Good days happened when there was time and energy to do journal writing, to think about what was happening, what patterns were occurring. We had a chance to look at how we were changing, growing. And we got feedback that challenged us to look at what we were doing as we created connections and community through our work.
- The good days happened when we had time to think and talk about our work. We knew that other women across Canada were doing the same kind of thinking and talking. Many of us realized, as the research continued, that we're all dealing with the same shit and a sufficient number of us are starting to make it public.

• Why did change happen?

Change happened for many of us because the research process resulted in reflection, feedback, and, therefore, increased awareness. The connection to other women doing the same work and dealing with the same issues helped us change. This seemed especially true when there was one other woman close by who shared our experience. It became safe to talk about personal growth.

Many of us were ready to change. In fact, some of us came into the project knowing that we wanted support for that change.

Some of our programs were ready to change and the project provided an opportunity. This was especially true when those of us involved in the project had a history of doing good work in our program or when the staff worked as a collective and could make the collective decision to change.

In some programs a significant group of women were involved in the project. The changes they experienced provided some impetus for the rest of the program to change in order to accommodate them. Also, many programs became more interested in group work because they saw how strong students became when they had a good group experience.

In some cases, change happened on a group or program level because there was funding available to provide the resources that supported the change. Also, being part of a national research project, affiliated with CCLOW, gave status to the work of individuals and groups and affirmed change as it occurred.

In some cases, change happened simply because the sources of resistance exhausted themselves as we persevered. Our vision, persistence, and ability to make the most of opportunity when it arises allowed change to happen.

• Why would we suggest that others do their own woman-positive activity?

We would suggest that others undertake woman-positive activities because we would like the world to be woman-positive, and we know that this small group of twenty-something cannot do it alone!

We learned from our involvement in this project that doing, reflecting, and talking can change our understanding. The more people who undertake this kind of activity, the greater the number of people who will understand the reality of women's lives.

We also learned that literacy programs are not necessarily structured in ways that take women's needs into consideration. Being woman-positive means doing things (sometimes little things) that make it possible for women to come to the program. Some of us learned that if programs are not woman-positive, they are woman-negative. The very things that programs ignore actively prevent women from having access to basic education.

We talked about being careful about how we present this idea — "woman-positive" — to others. Some people would simply lump all the women in a program together and then say that they were being woman-positive. Putting all the women together in one place is not always appropriate and it is never enough. We would, instead, like to be able to talk to people about a process of paying attention to what women say they need.

Sometimes talking to a program about being woman-positive might mean presenting very concrete questions: Do class times force women to choose between childcare and their own education? Do men dominate discussions in mixed classes? How do you choose your curriculum?

We also found that woman-positive activities benefit program workers. We are mostly women and our work has not been recognized or valued. We need to begin at a program level to give some recognition to the work that women do.

• Why would some women not want or be able to do woman-positive activities?

Overwhelmingly, we identified fear as the major obstacle which would prevent women from undertaking woman-positive activities. Fear of censure or punishment, fear of violence, of losing jobs or status in the community. This fear is not based on imagined constraints, but real ones — including lack of support from co-workers and administration; lack of funding, space, or childcare to make such an activity possible; lack of cultural sensitivity.

This fear is often based on a hierarchy that is set up between women. Those of us who advocate for change are seen as dangerous or marginal. Those of us who are lesbian or feminist or childless are told that we are not "real" women, and that if we were "real" we would not want things to change. Some women would not be able to take on woman-positive activities because it is simply too personally and professionally dangerous.

Some women may not support the idea of "woman-positive." The idea may conflict with their religion or with traditional cultural values. For some women, doing something woman-positive may seem like an imposition of individual values and issues.

Also, women may not be able to take on anything in addition to what they are already doing. A woman-positive activity could be seen as an extra and few women have time for anything extra.

Some activities are simply easier for some women to do.

Some women may not be aware of what it means to be woman-positive. They may not understand the issue because they have never experienced any obstacles. They may not want to become aware of the difficulties they face because they are women.

Some women do not believe that the notion of woman-positive applies to their situations. They see this idea coming from women with privilege and they may wonder if it is racist. The way in which "feminist" or "woman-positive" activities are planned and implemented often excludes groups of women because of assumptions and processes that are racist or culturally insensitive or ignorant.

Some of us know that being woman-positive will mean a change and we are afraid of what that change might mean. Crossing the line and becoming feminist may mean losing even more. Change may mean that everything familiar is lost. Perhaps our identity will also be lost in the process. That is frightening, exhausting, and too much for some of us to take on. We can only go through change when we have enough strength, courage, and support — when the time is right.

Being woman-positive for some of us means confronting our anger. We may not be ready to do that. Also, being woman-positive can mean confronting patriarchy. All of this is intimidating!

Taking the kind of risk inherent in woman-positive activities can mean risking our status in the community. For those of us who are already isolated, stepping even further outside our community may be completely unrealistic. In particular, those of us who are immigrant women receive very little support and friendship from women outside of our communities.

Summary

In summary, then, some women and programs got involved in this research to reduce isolation, to explore new literacy practices, to be part of research, or simply because it was time for change. Others may have chosen not to get involved because they didn't have the resources or support or because they resisted change or the term "woman-positive" itself. We chose our particular activities to try something new or to reflect on something we were already doing.

Support, power, personal credibility, and persistence — along with a strong vision of what we wanted to do — made it possible to go forward with our activities. At the same time, for some of us the risks were too great, the support was too little, or the resistance was too strong for us to continue with what we had planned. The good days in our programs happened because of material circumstances, because we had time to plan and share, because we felt connected. The research brought about change because we had time to reflect and it felt safe to grow with each other.

We believe that if others would also do woman-positive activities they might help change minds and attitudes. They might learn to listen to women and hear the small things they can do to reduce barriers and make education more accessible for women. However, some women will not want to do woman-positive activities, fearing the possibility of stigma, loss of status or credibility, violence. Some women cannot take these risks, especially without support. Others will not want to take these risks, fearing change, isolation, or ostracization. Or, they may simply not relate to the term "woman-positive," they may reject its seeming association with feminism.

5-4 The recommendations

The recommendations included here grew out of our experience during this project but they are rooted in the years of experience that we brought to it. The ongoing reflection during the research nurtured this growth and the recommendations took form following the development of our collaborative analysis at the third and final workshop.

An outline of the recommendations

Recommendation:
Getting women, in all our dimensions, on the agenda

- Responsibility for acknowledging sex/gender as one of the issues
- Women's paid work in literacy

Recommendation:
Program planning, implementation, and evaluation

- Violence
- Isolation
- Sexual harassment policies
- Anti-discrimination policies
- Woman-positive activities
- Fees and training allowances
- Transportation
- Space and privacy
- Curriculum
- Program-based action research

Recommendation:
Provision of support services

Recommendation:
Professional education and development

Recommendation:
Coalition building

Recommendation:
Policy analysis and development

- Inequities in education systems
- Funding
- Evaluation

Recommendation:
Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women

We developed these recommendations for organizations and networks involved in adult literacy and basic education, for politicians, policy makers, program administrators, paid staff and volunteers, students. At the centreof these recommendations is our belief that positive change in the development of adult literacy policies, programs, and practice occurs most effectively when all participants in a program, all members of a community, all peoples in a nation are equitably involved in decision-making.

This means that all of us have both an individual and collective responsibility to give space, time, and resources to those who have been marginalized where we work and live. We must use whatever authority we have to resist this marginalization and to facilitate the development of voices that have been silenced in the past.

We must be willing to recognize and confront in whatever ways we can the sexism, racism, class bias, homophobia, and ablism that exists at our workplaces and in our communities. We must recognize the violence that is done to people when they are isolated and dominated through physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual abuse. And we must begin with ourselves, with our own programs, in our own communities, as members of organizations, coalitions, and networks, as citizens who have the democratic right to hold our government accountable for its policies.

At the same time, we must not fool ourselves into thinking that change will come easily. We face resistance whenever we propose changes that may limit the privilege of those who are unable or unwilling to recognize injustice and then do something about it.

Recommendation: Getting women, in all our dimensions, on the agenda

• Responsibility for acknowledging sex/gender as one of the issues

Everyone involved in the field of adult literacy and basic education — students, volunteers, paid practitioners, administrators, advocates, bureaucrats, and politicians — must take responsibility for putting women's experience on the agenda in terms of program development and evaluation, provision of support services, professional education and development, coalition building, policy analysis, and government lobbying.

When we advocate for women's experiences as legitimate agenda items in the field of adult literacy and basic education, we must also recognize that experiences based on race, class, abilities, sexual orientation, citizenship status, and so on are legitimate agenda items. We must recognize that by raising sex/gender as an issue, we open the way for other dimensions of women's experience to be heard — women's experience of racism, class bias, ablism, homophobia, and heterosexism. We also open the way for men's experiences of both privilege and oppression to become agenda items.

- **Women's paid work in literacy**

Women are involved in adult literacy and basic education as paid staff as well as students. We make up the vast majority of adult literacy and basic education program workers. Like many other direct-service providers in female job ghettos, our work is devalued in terms of salary, working conditions, and respect. We often do administrative and counselling work as well as instruction, although these skills are not acknowledged or rewarded.

Students, practitioners, program administrators, board members, funding agencies, bureaucrats, and politicians must all take responsibility for understanding the consequences of this devaluation in the context of the rhetoric surrounding the importance of adult literacy and basic education. We must all advocate for an in-depth qualitative as well as quantitative investigation of the current working conditions of program practitioners, including the possibilities of developing minimum standards and wage levels, as well as a practitioners' union.

Affirmative action hiring policies should be implemented in programs, agencies, training institutions, and government departments. This is particularly important wherever women are under-represented in program administration or policy management positions, and wherever the paid staff and volunteers of a program do not represent the students or community in terms of sex, race, or culture.

Recommendation: Program planning, implementation and evaluation

Program planning, implementation, and evaluation must take place in a context that recognizes the reality of women's lives within the particular program and community. Programs must take the responsibility of providing a safe environment in which women can learn. There can be no excuse for allowing any woman to be treated as a second-class student, worker, or volunteer.

Staff, students, and volunteers must be willing to deal with difficult issues, issues such as violence against women and childcare, that directly affect women's equitable access to education. There is always something that can be done. If nothing else, those involved in a program can acknowledge that they do not have the resources to deal with particular issues. We can make the barriers visible, affirming women's experience and confirming our own inability or unwillingness to deal with these barriers.

- **Violence**

All those involved in the field of adult literacy and basic education must understand that both violence and the threat of violence are very real barriers to women's education. Physical, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual abuse must be recognized as past, current, and future possibilities in all women's lives.

- **Isolation**

Women's experience of isolation must be recognized as a key factor in women's limited participation or non-participation in the field of adult literacy and basic education. Women students, staff, and volunteers, women activists, bureaucrats, and politicians, often experience the isolation of being "other," of finding themselves physically, socially, intellectually, emotionally isolated in their work. Those of us involved in programs, community agencies, and government departments must break the isolation by making space for women to meet in small groups, to discuss the implications of the work they are doing on their personal, professional, and political lives.

- **Sexual harassment policies**

The development of sexual harassment policies, in particular, should take place with representative students, staff, and volunteers. All staff must acknowledge that a woman's right to safety within the program takes precedence over a man's right to education. All charges of harassment must be taken seriously.

- **Anti-discrimination policies**

Adult literacy and basic education programs must develop and implement anti-discrimination policies that address sexism, racism, class bias, ablism, and homophobia. These policies must be written in clear language, discussed with all new students, staff, and volunteers, and posted in public places as a constant reminder.

Different aspects of discrimination and anti-discrimination should become an integral part of the curriculum. Any observed or reported cases of discrimination should be taken seriously and acted upon immediately. Resistance to the development and adoption of anti-discrimination policies must be discussed publicly with all of those involved in the program.

- **Woman-positive activities**

All those who work in the field of adult literacy and basic education must be willing to explore and implement a variety of woman-positive activities within their settings. Program workers in particular must be willing to take the risks involved in providing women with opportunities to enhance their learning. This may include women-only groups and classes that can meet without the threat of active resistance from men or from women who cannot or will not understand why different groups of women may want or need to meet together.

Those who have the opportunity to make women's issues a priority in program, professional, and policy development must be willing to use that opportunity to consult with those who know what is needed at the program and community level. We must use our positions to assert that acting in ways that are positive for women does not result in a situation of inequity, although it may reduce the unfair privilege of some.

At the same time, all those involved in advocating for and implementing woman-positive activities must acknowledge the possibility of passive, active, and potentially violent resistance whenever they threaten the status quo. This should not necessarily result in withdrawing the activities, although we must all be aware of who might suffer the most serious consequences of this resistance. We have a responsibility to act in ways that will provide some measure of safety.

We must acknowledge that all those who work in the field of adult literacy and basic education can do something woman-positive in their settings. However, we must also acknowledge that circumstances vary. What is appropriate and possible in one setting may not be appropriate or possible in another. Some people may be able to change their individual attitudes towards women and implement small changes in their own professional practice. Others may be able to effect structural change within programs, agencies, or departments. Even recognizing and articulating that women are being discriminated against and that any one individual cannot possibly change situations of systemic discrimination is a woman-positive activity.

- **Fees and training allowances**

Programs must either be free or fees must be linked to women's abilities to pay. They should include training allowances wherever possible — especially when equivalent programs developed for men include training allowances.

- **Childcare**

Programs must recognize women's responsibility for children. Childcare needs must be accommodated if women are to have access to adult literacy and basic education programs. This may require some creativity on the part of funders, programs, and practitioners. Given that our government has chosen not to provide safe, accessible, affordable childcare, individual women cannot be asked to take sole responsibility for the care of our country's children.

- **Transportation**

Programs must take into account women's access to transportation. Where possible, bus passes should be made available. Where there is no public transportation system or where the public transportation system is unsafe or does not serve the needs of women, other arrangements must be considered.

- **Space and privacy**

Programs must provide appropriate and adequate space for women's learning. This often means providing space that allows for privacy since removing barriers to women's learning often involves discussion of past and current physical, sexual, and psychological abuse.

- **Curriculum**

It is essential that all programs provide gender specific, culturally relevant, and anti-racist curriculum materials. Where these materials are limited or not available, programs should make it a priority to advocate for the development of materials specific to the needs of their students.

All curriculum materials developed within a program or by outside interests should be evaluated by relevant cultural and women's interest groups before publication for sexist and/or racist content and tone.

Special funding should be advocated and allocated for writing adult literacy and basic education curriculums that could be used for women's studies/feminist studies. This curriculum should reflect the diverse reality of women's lives and the history for struggle in Canada and around the world. This would include the reality of women who live in rural and remote regions, who are poor and working class, who do not have a Euro-Canadian background, who have limited levels of education, who have been medically, psychologically, and intellectually labeled in a variety of ways.

The ideal curriculum does not require homework as it is an undue burden for women who often have paid work as well as family care responsibilities.

- **Program-based action research**

In order for women's experiences within particular programs and communities to be investigated, understood, and acted upon in significant ways, those who work in the field of adult literacy and basic education must allocate resources to program-based activities that will explore and meet different women's needs.

Action research, including participatory action research, must be supported as an effective way to both develop and evaluate adult literacy and basic education programs.

In particular, all those involved in research development and funding should work toward program-based research that would focus on concrete examples of how the recommendations from this project might be implemented in a variety of settings.

Recommendation: Provision of support services

We must all acknowledge the importance of a holistic philosophy of education, particularly in relation to women involved in adult literacy and basic education programs.

Program workers must be given the time and resources to do outreach with women's services and agencies within the community. Women cannot work on

reading, writing, and math separate from receiving information about such things as public health, the justice system, incest survivor groups, shelters for the homeless, transition houses for women in violent relationships, family planning, food banks, and children's aid.

Recommendation: Professional education and development

Those involved in professional education and development, both as instructors and as students, must include reflection and analysis of current adult literacy program administration, teaching, and counselling practices from the perspectives of the different women who participate as students, volunteers, practitioners, administrators, and board members.

We must also consider current practices from the perspective of the women who, for whatever reasons, are not participating in programs.

We must promote both individual and group reflection as a professional development tool. In doing so, we must emphasize that most practitioners do not currently have the time, resources, or opportunity to become involved in the kinds of reflection that leads to effective personal, professional, political, or structural change. Given the experience of the women who participated in this action research, resources that will facilitate practitioners' reflection must be made a priority both by programs and by those who fund research and professional development.

Train-the-trainer programs for those who work in family literacy, workplace, Native, and employability enhancement programs already exist. We must ensure that these programs include the perspective of the women who both participate and are blocked from participating.

The inclusion of woman-positive perspectives may be especially appropriate for training family literacy workers since many of these programs have not been sufficiently critical of the underlying premises that led to their formation.

We must advocate for and allocate resources to train-the-trainer programs for those who work primarily with women and for those whose programs are not adequately serving women.

Recommendation: Coalition building

We must recognize that adult literacy practitioners usually work in isolation and that their professional and political experiences are often fragmented. Those interested in women's experiences need to meet with others who both share and challenge their perspective. A particular effort must be

made by organizations and coalitions to involve students in their advocacy work, to educate decision makers about the realities of different women's lives, and to lobby for change.

Recommendation: Policy analysis and development

• Inequities in education systems

Everyone involved in the field of adult literacy and basic education must work toward understanding the inherent inequities of our education system, inequities that are supported by federal, provincial, and municipal education policies. We must work toward establishing a bureaucracy and policies that reflect the needs and values of the women who live and work in each jurisdiction. This is not a process that will ever be completed. It must be ongoing and it must take into account differences among women and between different regions of this country.

Those involved in policy analysis and development must acquaint themselves with the diverse reality of women's lives. They must listen and pay attention to the stories told by women who currently participate in adult literacy and basic education programs, or who might be able to participate if programs were appropriate, affordable, and accessible.

After acknowledging the diverse reality of women's lives, policy analysts and policy makers must either accommodate that reality in policy or explain that they are unwilling or unable to do so. In either case, they must be willing to make it clear that adult literacy and basic education programs must be changed if they are to meet the needs of women students.

• Funding

Funding for adult literacy and basic education programs must match the political rhetoric which claims these programs are a priority. It must be adequate, long-term, and stable.

Funding of established programs must not require justification year after year. Adult literacy and basic education should not be treated as a "project." It is a right, similar to youth education. This is particularly true in a political climate that holds individuals accountable for their employability.

Funding for adult literacy and basic education programs must cover the actual costs of adequate space, resources, and staff. As outlined above, the provision of adequate resources includes a consideration of equitable fees and training allowances, childcare, transportation, curriculum development, outreach to community services and agencies, professional development, and coalition building.

Funding must recognize the diversity of programs needed to meet the needs of adults who want or need to work on their reading, writing, and math

skills and otherwise upgrade their education. In particular, woman-specific and small group programing must be recognized as core requirements, not special projects.

At the same time, funding should not be so narrowly defined that only social assistance recipients or adults receiving unemployment insurance can participate. Current policies that restricts participation to preselected groups have worked to the detriment of women.

- **Evaluation**

Adult literacy and basic education programs must be evaluated qualitatively, from the perspective of what the women want to learn, rather than quantitatively, from the perspective of predetermined numerical counts of what women are able to accomplish following their participation.

Recommendation: CCLOW

CCLOW should take the lead in advocating for adult literacy and basic education policies that are woman-positive. The recommendations from this research, together with the recommendations from other CCLOW-sponsored research, should be integrated into CCLOW's mandate. This may mean determining whether women's experience of literacy education is a priority for the organization. CCLOW should take measures to ensure that the organization becomes accessible to all literacy workers, including increased representation of women from multilingual, multiracial programs.

Women who are not comfortable with the label "feminist" should be included in CCLOW's work, although the organization should maintain its current feminist identification.

Students in programs should be encouraged to participate in CCLOW and, therefore, the organization needs to consistently use clear language and non-print means of community outreach.

CCLOW should advocate for the funding of qualitative, program-based, and participatory action research in the field of adult literacy and basic education. In particular, it should study the relationships between the underfunding of programs, the use of volunteers, conditions of work, lack of status, and low salaries in the field of adult literacy and basic education. The findings should be used to promote improved standards for our work.

CCLOW should continue to publish about women and literacy. An issue of Women's Education des femmes should be devoted to woman-positive literacy practice. The organization should also find a way to acknowledge programs that have developed woman-positive activities and structural changes. It should continue and, if possible, increase the number of its scholarships for women involved in literacy and basic education. It should provide continued support for the Feminist Literacy Workers' Network (FLWN).

Section 2:

Who we are
What we did

Arctic College, Arviat, NWT

Rabbittown Learners Program, St. John's, NF

Saint John Learning Exchange, Saint John, NB

Toronto ALFA Centre, Toronto, ON

Beat the Street, Toronto, ON

Action Read, Guelph, ON

Brandon Friendship Centre, Brandon, MB

Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Prince Albert, SK

WEST, Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, Regina, SK

Keyano College, Fort McMurray, AB

College of New Caledonia, Prince George, BC

Malaspina College, Duncan, BC

6

Who we are. What we did.

At the beginning of phase two of this research, advisory committee members, CCLOW staff, and the researcher discussed a variety of guidelines for program outreach and selection. The four programs that participated in phase one had first priority for phase two. The second priority was regional representation. The third was representation of program characteristics, including (neither exclusively nor in any particular order of priority) rural/urban, north/south, age, First Nations, employability enhancement funding, volunteer-based, women of colour, public housing, women with disabilities, immigrant women, women working on issues of violence against women, and programs that identified as feminist.

Over the past nine months, Betty-Ann Lloyd had met many women in Halifax, Fredericton, Toronto, Kingston, and Saskatoon through presentations and workshops based on the research. A variety of national and provincial literacy publications had published material about phase one that included information about phase two. (For example, Lloyd, 1991b, 1991c, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c) All members of CCLOW had received information about the research, as had everyone on the mailing list of another CCLOW women and literacy project (1990): Telling Our Stories Our Way: A guide to good Canadian materials for women learning to read.

CCLOW continued this outreach, sending information to women on the mailing list of the Feminist Literacy Workers Network, all provincial adult basic education organizations and literacy coalitions, First Nations organizations, and feminist newspapers. Advisory committee members added any organizations or individuals they thought should be contacted.

At the end of phase one, during a meeting of members of the advisory committee, CCLOW had decided not to solicit participation from English as a Second Language programs, mother tongue literacy programs, and multilingual programs. Recognizing many of the racist assumptions embedded in government and institutional funding policies and within the literacy community, the organization agreed to advocate for separate research to be conducted by members of these programs.

Also, because CCLOW functions as an English language organization and because there is a francophone equivalent of CCLOW, it was decided not to solicit

French language programs. English language programs in Quebec received the same outreach information as in other provinces.

By May 1991, three of the four programs involved in phase one had expressed interest. Shortly after CCLOW published the phase one report, five other women called to indicate their interest. They had received the report through the informal networking of women in literacy and through involvement in CCLOW. There were now three programs in Ontario, two in British Columbia, and one each in Newfoundland and the Northwest Territories expressing interest.

After some outreach on the prairies and in the Maritimes, a second Alberta program and programs from Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island came forward. CCLOW did some outreach to union-based programs which resulted in a second Saskatchewan program.

By early October, fourteen programs had applied to participate. There was a mix of rural and urban, northern and southern programs. They represented a wide variety of program models: community-based and community college programs; a public housing, prison, and union program; a Friendship Centre; a program that worked with urban immigrant women primarily from the Caribbean; a program that worked primarily with northern Inuit women; and a program that worked with Aboriginal women.

Women who participated in these programs as students ranged from those involved in basic literacy work to those preparing to write grade 12 equivalency exams. Some of the programs already included women-only groups in their structure. Other programs had never before considered working with women as a particular student group. Every woman who expressed interest either had a very clear picture of what she wanted to do or was able to imagine several possibilities.

A teleconference meeting of advisory committee members, the researcher, and CCLOW staff set out to choose ten programs to participate and to discuss contingency plans should the final funding not come through in time for the workshop. In the end, twelve of the fourteen programs became part of the research.

During the first six months of the project two contact women from each program worked with the coordinating researchers to pull together a description of their community, program, and woman-positive activity. During the last six months they developed a description of what happened as a consequence of the activity including, in most cases, some documentation and interpretation of the process. The descriptions make up the majority of this chapter and the program documentation can be found in Women in literacy speak — The power of woman-positive literacy work. What follows in the next section is more particular information about the women who worked as coordinating and program researchers throughout the twelve-month process.

6-1 Who we are

It is well known, though nowhere documented, that the majority of adult literacy workers are women. Through the course of this research many of us questioned the connections between this reality and the reality that many programs, especially community-based programs, experience unstable, inadequate funding and poor working conditions. We became more and more convinced that a profile of adult literacy workers in Canada might answer some of our questions and raise others. At the final workshop we strongly recommended that quantitative and qualitative research of this kind be undertaken soon.

Without this profile, we cannot compare ourselves to literacy workers as a whole. Nevertheless, we are able to look at similarities and differences among us. As the twenty-seven women who worked in this project as program and coordinating researchers, we worked with others to define "woman-positive" within our own contexts. At the third workshop we collectively analyzed our experiences and we made recommendations about how the things we learned could be applied to literacy work across Canada. We recognized that readers of this book would want to know something about who we are.

The coordinating researchers developed a data sheet after discussion with women in the project about the personal, professional, and political information they felt was relevant. For example, when we first included only basic demographic details, several women indicated that they would be interested in women's educational philosophy and political beliefs. Others wanted information about working conditions, such as salaries and hours of work each week. Still others wanted to somehow indicate women's level of attachment to the communities in which they work.

All the women involved in the research following the second workshop worked with the form although some chose not to answer all the questions. Most women completed the form during the coordinating researchers' second site visit. A few phoned in their responses and several mailed in information.

• Personal histories

We range in age from 23 to 56 years old. Our average age is 38 with clusters of women at 31, 36, and 43. Nineteen of us are mothers with a total of 41 children ranging in age from under 1 year to 35. Seven women have one child, four have two children, six have three, and two have four.

Twenty-one of us identify as heterosexual. Of these, thirteen are married, five in common-law relationships, three dating, and one celibate. Three women identify as lesbian and all are in relationships. Three women did not respond to the question about sexual orientation.

Type of program and location	Hours of work	Annual salary*	Unionized	Job titles	Years in program	Level of education	Years in adult education
Community Based							
Northern: 1 program	f/t year round: 7	$24,000-$35,000 (ave $30,528)	no	counsellor, student support worker, assistant coordinator, associate coordinator, assistant executive director, executive director	1.5 - 9 (ave 4)	Some high school, some comm. college, B.A. and B.A./M.Ed.	2.5 - 10 (ave 7)
Urban east: 2 programs	f/t, sessional: 3	$16,224-$32,760	no	tutor, coordinator, adult education facilitator	4, 5 and 7	High school, comm. college, no answer	4, 5 and 7
Urban central: 3 programs	p/t, year round: 2	$26,000 (1/2 time and 4/5 time)	no	literacy worker	1 and 2.5	B.A. and B.A./M.E.S.	3.5 and 5
Rural urban west: 1 program	p/t, sessional: 1	$40,000 (2/3 time)	no	facilitator	3	B.Sc.	3
Community Colleges							
Urban north: 1 program	f/t, year round: 1	$54,000	no	department head	3	M.A.	20
Urban rural west: 1 program	f/t, sessional: 1	$49,000	no	coordinator	10	M.A.	12
Urban northwest: 1 program	p/t, sessional: 4	$31,000-$45,000 (ave $40,250) (1/2 time, 2/3 time and 4/5 time)	yes, yes, yes, no	instructor, coordinator	3-13 (ave 6)	B.A. and B.Ed. also E.S.L. Diplomas, M.A.	5-17 (ave 10.5)
Other Programs							
Urban rural west: 1 program	volunteer: 2	$0 for literacy work	yes	course leader	2	High school	2
Urban west: 1 program	f/t, year round: 1	$37,000	yes	section head	14	Teacher training	22
Urban east:	p/t, sessional: 1	$16,000	yes	teacher/counsellor	1	Post-secondary	6
2 researchers	f/t research: 2	$35,000	no	researcher		One B.A., one M.A.	16-20

* Indicates what the salary would be if the position was full time and year round.
f/t = full time p/t=part time

Of the twenty-seven women who answered the questionnaire, twenty-four identify as white. One woman identifies as Black, one as Indian from the Caribbean, and one as mixed Anglo Saxon French Native Canadian. Those of us who are white describe our race and culture in a variety of ways: fifteen as white Canadian of European descent (including three who added Mennonite, lesbian, and immigrant from the United States), four as white Canadian, two as Canadian, one as white English-speaking Canadian, one as Anglo-Saxon, and one as white French-Canadian.

Nineteen of the twenty-seven women live in the communities where we work. Four of us have lived here from seventeen to thirty-five years, ten from eight to fourteen years, and five for five years or less. Twenty of us are involved in activities and other organizations in these communities. Some of these activities are work-related, including union and literacy or adult education associations. Others involve volunteer work associated with children: coaching sports, sitting on the board of a children's choir, member of a parent-teacher association, organizer of a childcare centre.

Some of us are involved in groups which work towards equality for women, including advocacy for women in the justice system, coalitions against violence against women, a provincial lesbian action committee, and a task force to assess services for women. Many women are involved in community improvement and health groups. Some women make time for recreational activities for themselves, including ceramics, bingo, sports, and singing.

• Professional histories

We make up a very diverse group in terms of our levels of education, our salaries, and our years of experience in adult education. Most of us have volunteered or been employed in our current workplace from one to fourteen years. The average is five years. We have from two to twenty-two years experience. The average is nine years. Among those of us with one to ten years experience, our level of education ranges from some high school to a Masters degree. Of the six women who have worked in adult education from twelve to twenty-two years, all have a B.A. and three have Masters degrees. Almost all of the women with the highest levels of education work in community colleges. The relationship between women's salary, level of education, and the type of program which employs them is outlined on the chart on the opposite page.

Most of us work in hierarchical staffing structures. Only two programs defined their staffing structure as collective. Both were community-based programs in urban areas in Ontario. Women from one community-based program in eastern Canada described their structure as "sort of" collective.

We describe our reasons for doing this work in terms of personal satisfaction and in relation to our beliefs about the world. Whatever type of program we work in, whatever the working conditions in our program, most of us find this work to be very rewarding. Some of us described the rewards in terms of personal

interactions:

> Working with adults who honestly want to learn is fantastic! I couldn't work anywhere else.
>
> I enjoy working with adults and the challenge it brings me as a facilitator interacting with people. Learning about people and myself through them.
>
> Love working with people, especially women!

For some of us, the rewards of this work relate to our beliefs:

> I have always been interested in politics and education — literacy was the perfect match.
>
> I like the educational philosophy of the program I work with. I see it as part of work for social change.
>
> I knew people involved in literacy, knew that adults had little advocacy for basic education — thought I could do some good.

Many of us talked about how personally rewarding this work can be:

> I enjoy the work and feel it is valuable.
>
> I love the work. I care about the students. I think basic education is important.
>
> I learn things and find support and community. Pay.
>
> I'm good at it.

• Working conditions

Eleven of the twenty-five women who answered this questionnaire work part-time in literacy. Two of these women work as volunteers and three are paid on an hourly basis. The number of hours we work ranges from three or four for the volunteers to thirty-two hours a week. Most part-time workers do not work all year. Fourteen work full-time, but only nine of these women work year-round.

The average annual salary among those of us who work in community-based programs is $29,129. More than half of these work full-time. The average annual salary among women who work in community colleges is $44,000 and the majority are part-time sessional workers.

Only seven of us are union members. Two have full-time unionized jobs and do part-time work as volunteers. Four work in unionized positions in literacy. Only one of the unionized women works full-time in literacy. None of the unionized programs are east of Saskatchewan.

There are some regional differences in salaries. While the average salary is

$28,000 for women who work in both central and western programs, most who work in programs in Ontario work full-time, while most in the west work part-time. The average annual salary for women working in eastern programs is $25,000 and in northern programs is $47,000.

We did not compare benefits such as vacation time and health and dental plans but agreed that such information would be essential in a complete survey of working conditions for literacy workers in Canada. We also talked about how affirmative action or employment equity policies are dealt with very differently from program to program.

Like many women who work in literacy most of us have a range of roles. A few of us, usually those employed in community colleges, are called instructors and are paid primarily for teaching in classrooms. A number of us are called coordinators and our responsibilities include training volunteers, coordinating one-to-one tutoring, teaching individuals and small groups, planning and financially administering the program as a whole. A few of us are directors of programs and we have administrative functions with no direct service work.

• Educational philosophy

Most of us described our educational philosophy as learner-centred and participatory, a problem-solving approach to learning which starts from life experiences. Many outlined an individualized approach which empowers the learner and said that they base their teaching methods and materials on students' experience, need, ability, and goals. Some women described this as a humanist approach to teaching and learning, one used the term "metacognitive." Here are some of the comments which women made to describe their educational philosophy:

> All people come to an education process with a lot of knowledge. As an educator the challenge is to draw on this knowledge in such a way that it is learned or understood in a new way, creating new knowledge.
>
> To be truly participatory means to facilitate involvement, learning, questioning, and where to find answers. It means teaching people to question self and beliefs.
>
> My philosophy of education is one that views knowledge and learning as the products and process that can lead to personal and collective power.
>
> Community education whereby the community identifies needs and educators respond with resources and development.

Educational philosophy also came up in many of the interviews. Several mentioned that they wanted to be aware of the power imbalances between themselves and students. As one woman stated,

> I think the best climate for learning, at least in the literacy class, is when the

teacher arranges things as much as possible so there is no power struggle going on, and where the student does not have to be defensive. There can be no "teachable moment" until these conditions are met. I could characterize this as the teacher being in a very feminine posture. (Kate Nonesuch, Malaspina College)

• Political philosophy

Our political beliefs spread over a wider spectrum than our educational philosophies. We described ourselves as humanist, democratic, liberal, social democratic, socialist, leftist, and not very political.

> Cynical, but dreaming of equity and dignity for all; dreaming of human needs before corporate needs.
>
> Empowerment of working people, social justice, and a real democracy.
>
> I want to have a women's party. There should be a redistribution of wealth in our society and all members of society should have equal access.
>
> I listen to who is out there and what they have to say — someone who is really for the people in more ways than lip service — those who take a risk more and more.
>
> Those who have power and authority, or potential access to power and authority, do not act in ways that will fundamentally threaten their position. They will maintain their position by marginalizing others. This reality should be made visible as clearly and straightforwardly as possible.
>
> More access to social programs.

We also asked each woman if she identified as feminist either to herself or to others. Fifteen said that we consider ourselves feminist, three said "Yes, using my definition of feminism (equality)," one said "I don't — others sometimes do," three said "no." Three of us described discomfort with the term "feminist."

> I am reluctant to let go of the label although I am increasingly uncomfortable by the ways in which privileged women use it to maintain their privilege.
>
> I hate these terms but I want socialist, true democracy, women inclusive.
>
> I believe strongly in the importance of equity, I believe it is important to analyze the historical and economic roots of inequality, I believe it is vital that we envision alternatives. The label feminist seems narrow.

• Who do we work with?

Many women wanted to talk about the differences between ourselves and our students in terms of race and culture, class background, and different

abilities. Some of us are very aware of these differences and consider equity issues central to the ways in which we work within our programs. Others of us are more comfortable acknowledging the ways in which we build on commonalities in our experience. In many of our programs, equity considerations are not visible.

Nineteen of us indicated that our race and culture is different from that of the people with whom we work. Four work solely with Aboriginal and Métis people, and two work solely with immigrants. Ten work with people from diverse races and cultures. Two women indicated that they work with people who are poor and one said she works with people who are physically disabled. Here are some of the ways we describe the differences between ourselves and our students.

> Belief values [of my students] are stronger. Importance and respect for elders is lacking within my culture.

> I work primarily with other white women. I work primarily with heterosexual women which is a different culture than my own.

> I am a woman with white-skinned dominant culture privilege. Some women I work with are of various cultural backgrounds, some women are of different racial and cultural backgrounds.

> Learning experience. I enjoy it. It is wonderful.

Seven women indicated that they do not work with people who have different racial or cultural backgrounds from their own.

> Too much racism on the street for integration in program.

> Not really. Cultural differences seem to go away on closer inspection — more important how people treat each other and other living beings.

Some of us commented both on the questionnaire and at other points during the research that many programs where the majority of students are Native have few Native staff. As one women stated, "Hiring practices need to shift so that staff are more representative of the populations they serve."

In the second interview, women often talked about the importance of allowing bonds to develop among students, whether they are culturally similar or diverse. Students often share experiences and can provide support to one another in ways an instructor never could. One woman said,

> Both Native and non-Native women experience family violence. Native and non-Native women experience concerns around issues like daycare and relationships with other people in the community which is an abiding interest. There are so many similarities around social issues that the difference about culture ends up being overridden by the social immediacy of some of the concerns. (Nancy Steel, Keyano College)

We described our class backgrounds in several different ways. Talking about

the families we grew up in, one of us identified as upper class and six of us said we had middle class backgrounds. Five women said they had a mix of middle and working class backgrounds. Eleven of us came from working class families, two from a mix of poor and working class, and one from fixed income and working class.

Five of us said our class backgrounds are the same as those of the students in our programs. Seventeen women said they work with women from different class backgrounds than themselves. Most of these women explained these differences in terms of economics, and described the students as being "poor," "on fixed incomes," "working class," "unemployed," or "on social assistance."

Again, in the second interview some women talked about becoming aware of their assumptions about the lives of the students they work with. One pointed out how surface similarities can mask real differences in experience.

> I have two children, a lot of people in my class have at least two children. But the way we regard our children is not the same. The way we raised them isn't the same. The expectations we have for them aren't the same. But at the same time we have a lot in common. . . . Women in my classroom are poor. They all are, every last one of them. And I'm not by comparison. I don't feel rich, but by comparison I have my own house, we have two cars and most of these students don't have one. So they probably think I'm pretty rich and I don't feel like it. (Vicki Noonan, Malaspina College)

Thirteen of us said we are working with women whose abilities are labeled differently than our own.

> I work with women with disabilities in many cases. For example, women who are blind or have other disabilities. I often work with people who have less formal education.
>
> Some are labeled "mentally retarded" or "developmentally delayed." Physical disabilities confine some to wheelchairs. Others suffer from emotional instability due to abuse and being shuffled around.
>
> Physically, emotionally, and sexually abused women; drug and alcohol affected and damaged mentally.
>
> I was never labeled around my personal abilities as many of the women I work with have been. There were personal labels in my life that stem from class or income which led to assumptions about future, but not about personal abilities.

• Our reflections on difference

When we raised the question of differences among staff and students during the second interview many women talked about the importance of acknowledging our power as instructors. Often this power related to how students might perceive us.

Several women stressed the importance of developing commonalities with students, and building trust by talking about their own experiences.

> I would say that a woman coming into the classroom first time would feel quite intimidated because here I am a white woman — not only white, but free. I'm free to come and go as I please. I think that could be pretty intimidating . . .
>
> The thing I use to break down that difference between Native and non-Native is experiences. . . . I can share about the same experiences that they have experienced and all of a sudden the walls kind of just drop and they are able to say, "Yeah, it's not the fact that she's white that she's separate from us." The fact that I have experienced similar situations and am able to share with the women breaks down that barrier. . . .
>
> I have to be the one to share first and talk to them about how I feel, or how I felt about certain situations and then they feel okay to risk. (LaVera Schiele, Pine Grove Correctional Centre)

At the same time they stressed that we have to be aware that the same experiences can affect us very differently.

> Being called a cunt doesn't feel any nicer for a woman staff than it does for a student. Being called a slut. It doesn't threaten me as much, though, because I am staff. I might have to deal with the violent part of it but I'll eventually get some support. The woman student may have to go stand on the same street corner to find shelter tonight. . . . This woman is going to have to go out on the street and deal with him. So if he's angry at her she can become a victim again and again. (Pat MacNeil, Beat the Street)

And we have to be aware that we have power in the classroom. We have to be very careful not to impose our values on students, particularly when we are working with women from cultural backgrounds different than our own.

> If we start questioning a woman's relationship to her husband because from our point of view it's really a sexist relationship — what is that saying to that woman? Leave your country, leave your family, leave your culture, leave your customs because we have the right way you should be living? Go on welfare? That's the reality. Instead, what we're offering is options. (Paula Davies, College of New Caledonia)

While we were working in widely differing contexts and with a range of activities defined as "woman-positive," some of the most striking learnings from this research resulted from paying attention, often for the first time, to the specific needs of women in the program.

> I learned that women all across Canada live the same kind of lives. Even though we're different races, different ages, different class, we all have a lot of common ground. I learned that literacy is really, really important and it's also very difficult for women. A year ago I would not have thought that literacy was harder for a woman to achieve than a man. (Debbie Heagy interview, WEST)

"We sat at the kitchen table and helped each other.

The Women's Upgrading Program
Arctic College
Arviat, Northwest Territories

Arviat is a hamlet of 1,300 people located on the west coast of Hudson Bay, approximately 300 air miles north of Churchill, Manitoba. Arviat is not on a road system. It can only be reached by airplane or skidoo in the winter and by airplane or boat in the summer. Ninety percent of the population is Inuit.

The economic base is government jobs and welfare, with some private sector development such as a Northern Store, a Co-op Store and Motel, a lumber supply company, a construction company, and a locally-controlled Inuit development corporation. Community agencies include a library, drug and alcohol centre, Catholic Church youth program, community radio station and many volunteer committees such as youth justice and health. The school has grades K to 12.

The people's lifestyle in Arviat is a blend of traditional and modern ways. For example, traditional practices such as fishing, hunting, and making clothing out of animal skins are widely-practiced and valued skills. Many people depend on the land for food subsistence and for maintaining traditional life and culture. Inuktitut is the first language of most Inuit and is used in daily life. While many people hold a romantic view of the North, in reality the community is a blend of stark contrasts. There is wealth, but also poverty, and some people often do not have enough to eat. There is beautiful scenery and disturbing sights of neglect and garbage. Many people are bilingual in English and Inuktitut. Some are literate in neither.

Arviat fought for, and recently succeeded in getting, a public education program up to grade 12. In 1991, seventeen students graduated: ninety-five percent of the high school graduates in Keewatin Region of the Northwest Territories. On the other hand, there is a significant attendance problem in elementary school. The public education system is developing and there is common recognition that the system generally fails to produce enough people ready to go on to the

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"Here's me just being me.

On one side Ellen is gently chiding me for being feminist and I feel almost obligated not to let her down, while carefully avoiding whatever degree of strident fervour might offend her. On the other side is Val, whom I'm also trying not to alienate or carry against her will into foreign waters.

And I'm trying to stay within these imaginary lines without even knowing how the lines are defined in their minds and, sometimes, in my own mind. When Val finally reveals her hand, I realize I assumed a lot of things that weren't even true.

If this is happening amongst only three women, the complexities amongst all women is too overwhelming to consider! Has the word "feminist" created half the battle?

Karen Bergman-Illnik, "Charting the woman-positive ripples — A journal of discovery"

higher education and training needed to prepare the Inuit for the management of their homeland.

The Community Learning Centre in Arviat is part of the Arctic College system. It is a community-based operation, with an elected Community Education Council responsible for hiring and for developing programs. Besides a full-time adult basic education program mandated by the College, the Centre sponsors a job entry program funded by the Canada Employment Commission (CEC), and programs such as home healthcare workers, secretarial arts and office procedures, English and Inuktitut literacy, Mums and Tots literacy, and GED. It co-sponsors workshops with other community and government agencies on issues such as family violence, mothers and self-esteem, and parenting for single parents. The staff includes nine women and two men.

In many ways, women are making the transition from traditional to modern lifestyles more readily than men. They hold many of the management-level jobs that require education and administrative skills. Many women also sit on the elected hamlet council and other community agencies and organizations.

The Women's Upgrading Program started in 1988 and runs from October to May each year. Women meet two nights per week for three hours. About half the time is spent on English and math skills. The rest of the time is spent on topics which the group selects at regular planning times. The women also choose how to explore the topic, for example, by inviting guest speakers, conducting interviews, or writing a story.

Involvement in the CCLOW research project

Karen Bergman-Illnik had facilitated the Women's Upgrading Program at the Community Learning Centre for two years when she was contacted by Lynn Fogwill, the Literacy Specialist for the Northwest Territories and a member of the CCLOW advisory committee for this research project. Lynn suggested that the Arviat program take part in the exploratory phase of this work. After receiving agreement from Karen and the Centre, Lynn came to Arviat with Betty-Ann Lloyd, the contract researcher. Karen, some of the women from the women's program, and staff at the Centre had several conversations with Betty-Ann about women's experiences in Arviat and in literacy.

After receiving the report from phase one, Karen approached Joy Suluk, the adult educator at the Community Learning Centre, about participating in the second phase. Karen came to the first national workshop with Selma Karetak, who had facilitated the program for a short time, but is no longer involved.

"I had agreed to pick up Kate [not her real name] on my way to the centre. When I got to her house she was alone with her kids. Her husband was out hunting and she'd asked her dad to babysit. He hadn't showed yet, so we sat down to wait for him. We visited, I tried out my Inuktitut on the kids, we talked about kids.

Kate said she'd been writing in her journal and I asked if I could see it. She had to look for it, rummaging through the cupboards and getting a chair to stand on so she could search in the cupboard above the fridge. I heard lots of complaining sounds about how the kids were always getting into her stuff and she couldn't keep anything to herself. I wondered how it could be hard to find something in her house which is almost bare. Not full of "stuff" like mine is. She finally found her journal and I started to read.

There is something very magical about her writing. I feel bombarded by her words, even though she writes simply and in broken English. One part that sticks in my mind is when she talks about a recent incident — very descriptive and I could see the events in my mind as if I was there. Then she wrote, "When will my life be normal? Just go along? It's so crazy. So fucking crazy. Never normal. Just shit, shit, shit. All the time shit." Some of it was underlined and darkened by writing over many times with the pen. She captured the voice in my own head with those words — phrases — ideas — rage — We talked about how we might be able to get our writing published.

Karen Bergman-Illnik, Interview 2

The woman-positive activity

During 1992, Karen worked with six women. Five of them met on Monday and Wednesday nights at the Centre and Karen worked with the sixth at her workplace. She was interested in exploring the effects of the program at various levels: for herself as facilitator, for the women who participate as learners, for the other staff, and for the community. She also wanted to spend time looking at and thinking about what outside events affected the women's program. What effect did community events, such as an awareness campaign on satanism, have on the program? What effect did learners' increased connection with the community through program projects, such as sponsoring a teen dance, have on themselves and other community members?

Karen planned to provide an opportunity for Centre staff to learn more about and discuss this research. She worked with the women in the program to help them think about and express their experience as women in their community. She documented, reflected, and wrote about how she was changed by the women's program and by doing the CCLOW research. She wanted to document how other staff were affected by the research.

This is what happened

For seven months Karen recorded her experience with the research in a journal. She tried to pay particular attention to the effects of the research on herself, the staff at the learning centre, and the learners. Karen edited her journals to produce a public version. She also wrote a short fictionalized story based on some of the more controversial and personally difficult parts of her experience in the research.

The most significant effect of the research was on Karen herself. The support of the coordinating researcher and the other women in the project, together with her reflective writing, created a fertile environment for deeper understanding, personal growth, and change. She decided to put political action on hold for a while as she sorted through personal questions of identity and vulnerability. She has come to believe she cannot advocate other women empowering themselves while denying elements of fear, silence, and domination in her own life.

The effects of the research on the learning centre staff are documented in bits and pieces — mostly through the personal interaction between staff and Karen, and only through Karen's eyes. This was the most surprising outcome of the research in Arviat. It was also the hardest part because Karen found it risky to focus attention on women and say, "maybe women are oppressed and perhaps things should change." It seemed especially difficult in a community that holds fast to tradition and uses it to measure most things.

"

I found more cookbooks in the instructor's resource library and, with them, two copies of Our Bodies, Ourselves. I put them on the table and one woman said, "Oh, those are like . . . dirty books." Eventually another woman picked one up. She commented on one page with photos of live births. The conversation took off from there. We talked about our own birth experiences. A woman who is usually shy surprised me with her openness and leading role in discussing the book.

The conversation flowed naturally as we flipped through the book, looking at pictures and talking about everything from IUDs to STDs. The section about how our bodies look inside was quite interesting. The drawings of the male anatomy caused lots of laughter, especially the erect penis. I don't think the laughter was out of nervousness alone. I just remember how much they laughed at that part.

At the end I suggested we ask a nurse to class next week to talk more about our bodies and ourselves. They agreed.

Karen Bergman-Illnik, "Charting the woman-positive ripples — A journal of discovery"

Karen feels the research had an effect on staff. It seemed to make them uncomfortable and, as a consequence, may have distanced them from the research. She feels partly responsible for this reaction or lack of reaction. Better information and persistence on her part might have had different results. After a few surprising incidents early in the project she struggled to find a safe way to discuss the research among co-workers throughout the project. She never felt she found the right approach.

The effects of the research on the women is not clear. Karen tried twice to discuss the research with the women; at the beginning of the program and again near the end. It was also mentioned occasionally throughout the program. The learners didn't seem interested because, Karen suspects, it wasn't meaningful to them. Karen felt she and the learners lacked common ground and language within which to discuss the research. To talk about "women," Karen and the learners talked about concrete experiences around health, housework, and family.

The class participated in community activities outside the program, more than in other years. For example, the women held two dances at the school gym. Afterwards, one woman talked about how she could take a leadership role in the community and make changes where she saw a need for change. All the women involved felt positive about others seeing them as powerful and in charge at the dance.

The class attended and talked about some community events. The effect on the learners is unclear, but the class did provide a forum to discuss and reflect on the events around them.

This is the fourth year of the women's program and the overall effects of this year were similar for learners in previous years. In particular, the element of continuity became evident in a few women's lives who have been connected to the program since the beginning. The overall effects on learners can be described as:

- learners and instructor grew with the support and safety of the community they created among themselves in the program;
- learners developed new connections with the larger community, tapping into resources, developing their identity, gaining new knowledge;
- learners acquired more math and English skills.

The overall effect is empowerment.

Karen wrote a short story, "DIS/COVER," as her documentation of what happened during the research process. Shortly after, she moved from Arviat to Yellowknife and sent her story to Joy Suluk as part of the final research process. When Joy read the story she felt very upset. She called Betty-Ann and then Karen. All three women wanted to arrange a teleconference to talk about what should happen next.

"

I went to see the Social Worker with my student today. . . .
One of my sons was in the waiting area of the Social Services office waiting for me after school as we'd arranged.

When I came out, he wanted to know what I was doing. I told him I couldn't say too much because it was someone else's private business, but I told him that some men were bullying and abusing a woman because they knew she was weaker. I said I wanted him to know from this that it's for us to use our power and stand up with people who are weaker against those who abuse them. And so the ripples caress my son.

Karen Bergman-Illnik, "Charting the woman-positive ripples — A journal of discovery"

After they talked for a while Karen said she would feel all right about not publishing her story as part of the research documentation. Instead, Betty-Ann would work with her journals which would become the account of what happened with Karen and with the Women's Upgrading Program because of the research. Joy and Karen also decided to write something that Betty-Ann would edit and add to the end of the Arctic College program description.

During that call, Karen talked about how she wrote the story as a way of capturing her feelings during the research. She intended it to be fiction, but Joy clearly felt that many people could be identified. Joy later wrote,

> I felt like pretending the story didn't exist and that I didn't know anything about it. I tried to ignore it, but sleep wouldn't come. I had to talk with Karen about my concerns and that was one of the hardest things I ever had to do, mostly because I felt guilty for not being sensitive to other people's feelings. If I hadn't talked with Karen, I would never have forgiven myself for not trying my best to prevent something that would sever my friendship with her and others.

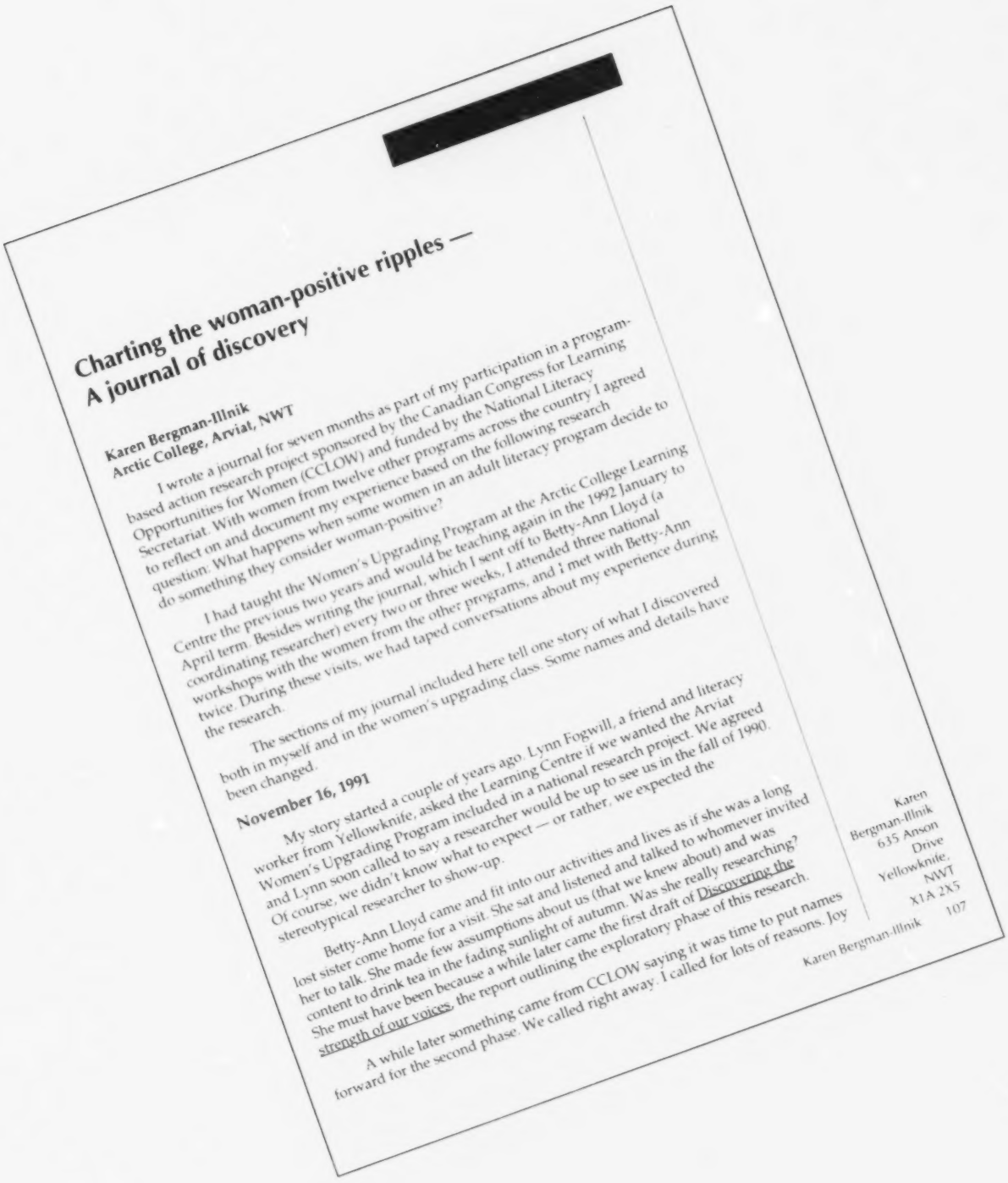
Karen said her first reaction to hearing Joy's concerns was "too bad" — it took her right back to many of the difficult feelings she had experienced over the year. Nevertheless, she decided to listen and, in the process, discovered she could tie-up some unfinished ends in the story.

Karen was able to tell Joy things she could not discuss during the time they were happening — particularly her feelings of isolation from her community, her co-workers, and her friends. She explained that it wasn't that she chose not to talk about it. She just didn't have the words to talk about something that she was in the middle of sorting out for herself. She talked about how she felt when some of her discoveries about herself completely changed the way she fit into her community. Karen later wrote,

> This change had been so huge, so deep, that it gave me the courage to leave Arviat and make major changes in my life. These were not easy changes, but very scary, sad, difficult, exhilarating, and power-filled.

Joy also talked about how she had been in the midst of change at the time of the research. Since receiving the story, she has spent time reflecting on how she might have prevented Karen's feelings of isolation. Joy wrote,

> I realize now that what we have since discussed couldn't have taken place at the time because we were both in the middle of making changes in our lives. My change was job-oriented rather



Charting the woman-positive ripples — A journal of discovery

Karen Bergman-Illnik
Arctic College, Arviat, NWT

I wrote a journal for seven months as part of my participation in a program-based action research project sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. With women from twelve other programs across the country I agreed to reflect on and document my experience based on the following research question: What happens when some women in an adult literacy program decide to do something they consider woman-positive?

I had taught the Women's Upgrading Program at the Arctic College Learning Centre the previous two years and would be teaching again in the 1992 January to April term. Besides writing the journal, which I sent off to Betty-Ann Lloyd (a coordinating researcher) every two or three weeks, I attended three national workshops with the women from the other programs, and I met with Betty-Ann twice. During these visits, we had taped conversations about my experience during the research.

The sections of my journal included here tell one story of what I discovered both in myself and in the women's upgrading class. Some names and details have been changed.

November 16, 1991

My story started a couple of years ago. Lynn Fogwill, a friend and literacy worker from Yellowknife, asked the Learning Centre if we wanted the Arviat Women's Upgrading Program included in a national research project. We agreed and Lynn soon called to say a researcher would be up to see us in the fall of 1990. Of course, we didn't know what to expect — or rather, we expected the stereotypical researcher to show-up.

Betty-Ann Lloyd came and fit into our activities and lives as if she was a long lost sister come home for a visit. She sat and listened and talked to whomever invited her to talk. She made few assumptions about us (that we knew about) and was content to drink tea in the fading sunlight of autumn. Was she really researching? She must have been because a while later came the first draft of Discovering the strength of our voices, the report outlining the exploratory phase of this research.

A while later something came from CCLOW saying it was time to put names forward for the second phase. We called right away. I called for lots of reasons. Joy

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> than personal, but it was something new to me so I, too, didn't know exactly what I was doing, or was supposed to do. I realize now that I should never allow work to come between people who care for one another.

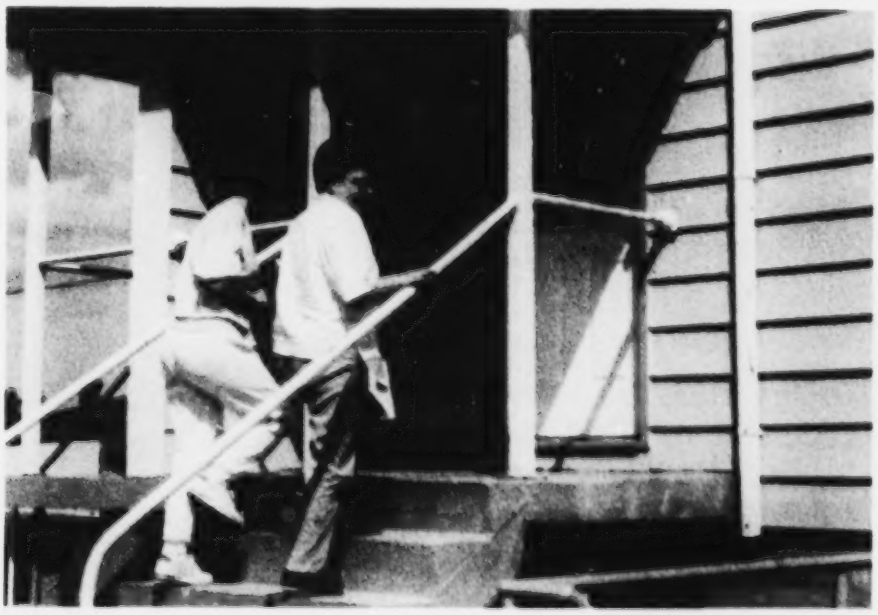
Karen felt both surprised and not surprised that they were each able to talk about such a difficult time in their lives even though they are in some ways on the opposite sides of the experience.

> It's like we are both standing there saying, "Yes, the way you see it is the way I see it. And this is the way I have to deal with it." Is the "it" our own safety? More than that, we're talking about what makes each of us us, and how we make our place and our way in the world.

What was produced

Karen's edited journal — Charting the woman-positive ripples: A journal of discovery — is included in Women in literacy speak.

"We decided to visit women in the community to find out why they were not coming to the program.



Survey of Women
Rabbittown Learners Program
St. John's, Newfoundland

The Rabbittown Learners Program was organized and sponsored by the Rabbittown Community Association. This group is made up of tenants with the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation (NLHC). The program began in 1988 and operates out of a community centre which is owned and maintained by NLHC. The centre, located in St. John's North, provides a variety of recreation, social, and educational programs for all age groups in the area. There are 284 housing units with 133 single parent households. A majority of the residents live on some form of government assistance.

The program provides irregular employment for six women: a coordinator, an administrative assistant, and four tutors. The group organizes small fundraising activities but for the most part the program is financed through Job Development Grants from the Canada Employment Commission (CEC). Core funding is not available to community-based programs in this province and for several months each year the Rabbittown Learners Program staff work on voluntary status. On October 16, 1992, the program closed due to lack of funds. In the previous twelve months the staff had worked on voluntary status for nine months. Activities are now underway to secure a commitment of long-term funding through a partnership with the federal, provincial, and municipal governments, and the Newfoundland and Labrador Literacy Coalition.

Involvement in the CCLOW research project

Through Frances Ennis, a member of the Rabbittown advisory committee, the program heard that CCLOW was beginning a research project on women and literacy. Frances discovered that Rabbittown was interested in participating. The first phase of this project involved a group meeting with Betty-Ann Lloyd, the contract researcher. Although anxious to get started, women at Rabbittown were also a little apprehensive. What sorts of questions would she ask? How open would staff be in talking about themselves and their experiences in literacy? What difference would this make to them and the women in the program?

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Learners
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"We were feeling a little uneasy going door-to-door with our questionnaires. We didn't know what kind of reception people would give us, but headed out with an air of confidence we didn't entirely feel.

The morning was great. We were invited into three homes. People were hesitant at first, but when they found out we were not from Housing they relaxed and chatted. The women readily opened up when they realized we have so many things in common.

Although the response was good in the afternoon we felt a little depressed. We visited one lady who just lost her husband and we felt as though we were invading her privacy. The stories women were telling us were sad — there's a lot of poverty out there. Older people were very friendly and chatty. There was a sense of loneliness with them but at the same time, for the most part, they seemed contented.

Mostly single moms invited us into their homes. We felt that the women we visited with were very lonely and needed to talk with someone about their problems. We sensed that some of these women were experiencing abuse. One woman spoke of words like "slut" and "whore" being used to describe her.

We completed thirteen questionnaires today, our first day.

Frances Ennis with Rabbittown staff, "Uncovering fear and isolation in Rabbitown"

When the day finally arrived, six of the women sat around a table with cups of tea and began talking with Betty-Ann. What took place was amazing. Concerns about women came pouring out. The women at Rabbittown Learners Program realized they really wanted to talk and listen to each other and somehow Betty-Ann's questions hit the exact chord. When the meeting was over, the women decided that somehow they were going to get more women back into the program. When it came time for the second phase, women from Rabbittown immediately expressed their interest.

The woman-positive activity

The Rabbittown Learners Program was initially set up to serve tenants in the area but has grown in size and reputation. At the beginning of the research, there were more learners from other areas of the city participating. The staff were concerned about this change and were particularly keen to encourage more women's participation. As their woman-positive activity they decided to connect with every woman in the area to find out why women from the community were no longer involved in the program.

In discussing how to approach the women, the group felt that it was important to ask for opinions about women's involvement in general and not to focus on why an individual woman would or would not choose to become involved. They hoped this approach would facilitate more discussion and felt that the women's opinions would be very insightful. The tutors — Bella Biddiscombe, Sandra Cadwell, Betty Jackson, and Cathy Short — decided to work in pairs for door-to-door visits. Shirley Hickey, the coordinator, was responsible for documenting the research.

A questionnaire was developed and each pair was to ensure that it was given to the woman in the household, going back several times if necessary to do this. They were to return at a specified time to pick up the completed questionnaire, discuss it with the woman, or help her fill it out. If there was discomfort with forms the tutors were to take mental notes of the discussion and record it when they returned to the centre.

This is what happened

From February to May of 1992 program workers went from door to door throughout the community. Each home was approached at least twice, but the staff were able to have discussions with only seventy-six women. They were excited to have been able to talk with so many women but felt badly about those they did not reach.

A high number of women in one particular area seemed not to be at home. Rabbittown staff were surprised and surmised that the person answering the door didn't want the staff to talk with the woman.

"People are still not answering their doors. When a man answers the door he will often say that the woman is not home, but we have a feeling she is. Many of the same issues are coming up again and again: abuse, isolation, childcare and household responsibilities, financial insecurity, lack of support from family, husband, and community.

Sometimes it feels like a lot of women are not interested in anything outside their homes.

One woman, when asked about the Centre, talked about homosexuals keeping women from going to any centre. She was referring to the media representation of a recent "lesbian scare" at our local Women's Centre, which forced it to close. She went on to say, "My husband doesn't want me to go anywhere, there's no trust. Some men think women should stay home and tend on them."

Another woman responded to our questionnaire about the Centre by asking, "What difference will it make if I get involved in outside activities or go to the Centre? Will it put food on my table? Will it pay my bills?"

Frances Ennis with Rabbittown staff, "Uncovering fear and isolation in Rabbitown"

Some women were just not interested in talking and indicated they had nothing to say. In a lot of cases Rabbittown staff felt the woman didn't want to talk because men were home. In several instances a discussion would be underway with a woman and the man would butt in or answer a question. The woman would then say, in one form or another, "I'm really not interested in this."

In many instances, people would just not answer the door. Clearly people were inside and on several occasions someone was seen peeking out behind a curtain. In other instances, a man would answer the door and say the woman was not interested, even though he would not tell her that anyone was there to see her.

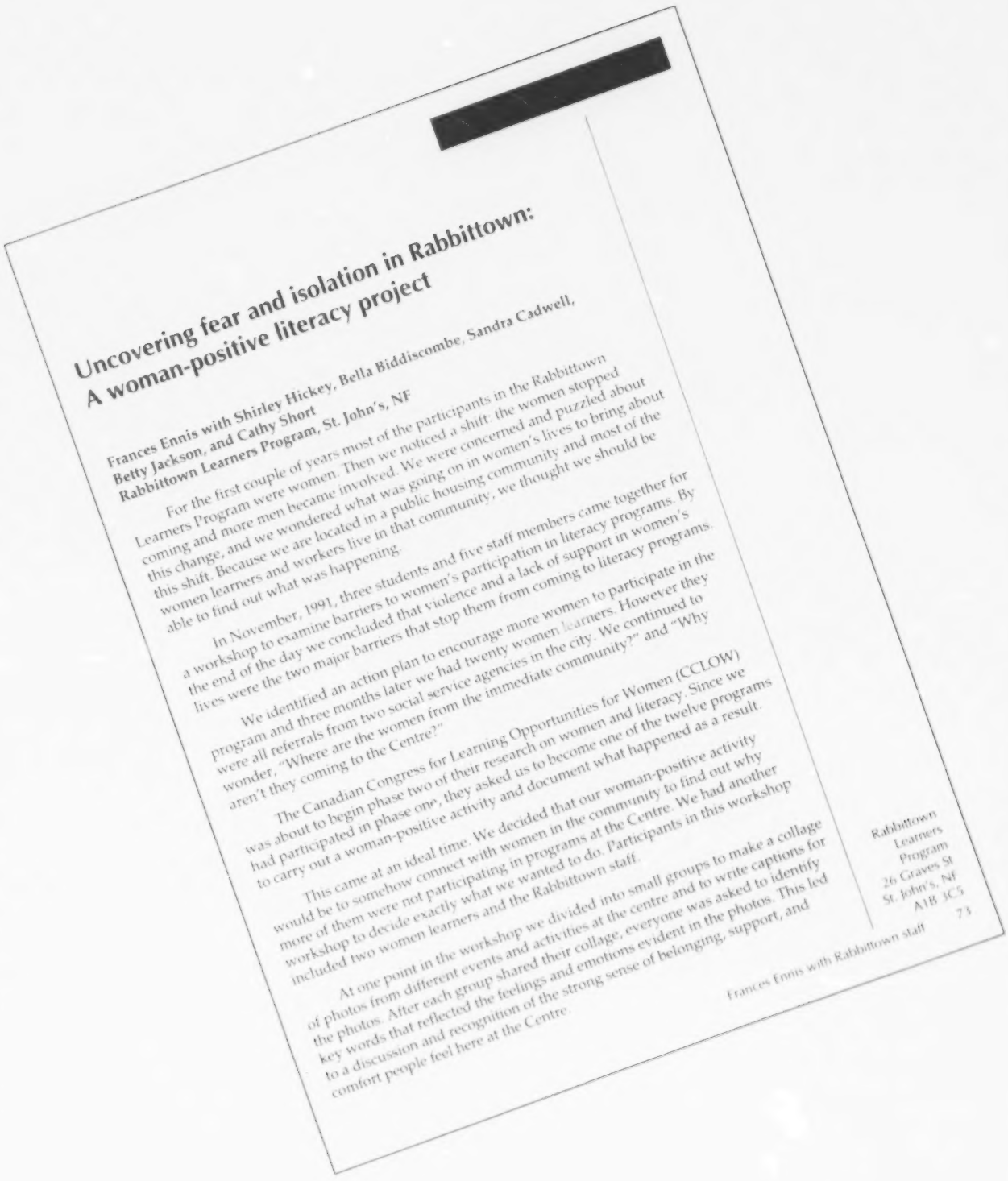
In one instance, the man and the woman were home and Bella asked if they knew anything about the Rabbittown Community Centre. The man answered, "Yes" and said, "It's okay for you (the woman) to fill out the form." When Bella began talking to her about women he told Bella to get out. By mistake Sandra went to the same house and he answered the door. He said, "My wife is out and she's not filling out any goddamn forms about women."

For the most part, older women were not interested in completing the questionnaire. They did often welcome the researchers in for a cup of tea and were quite happy with the company and an opportunity to show photos and talk about their family members. In general, this was the group who appeared to be most contented with their lot in life.

Through their conversations, the staff at Rabbittown learned that many women in the community believe it is important for women to interact with each other. They felt that space should be provided for women to share issues and concerns in a supportive environment. The Rabbittown staff were not entirely surprised to hear that women were not participating in programs due to the stresses and pressures associated with violence in their lives, isolation, childcare and household responsibilities, financial insecurity, and lack of support from family, partner, and community.

The question which women responded to with enthusiasm and perhaps a healthy dose of defiance was, "Do you think women today are starting to be more independent and want to be in control of their lives?" Their comments ranged from "women want a better life for themselves" to "women are tired of being controlled" to "a woman feels the need to be financially independent, having this kind of independence puts a woman in control." As one woman said, "Times have changed . . . Women see things in a different light."

Perhaps the emphasis women placed on concepts like independence, equality, and freedom — along with statements about the importance of programs for women — is an indication of their personal interest in change. The survey questions were deliberately worded to ask



Uncovering fear and isolation in Rabbittown: A woman-positive literacy project

Frances Ennis with Shirley Hickey, Bella Biddiscombe, Sandra Cadwell, Betty Jackson, and Cathy Short
Rabbittown Learners Program, St. John's, NF

For the first couple of years most of the participants in the Rabbittown Learners Program were women. Then we noticed a shift: the women stopped coming and more men became involved. We were concerned and puzzled about this change, and we wondered what was going on in women's lives to bring about this shift. Because we are located in a public housing community and most of the women learners and workers live in that community, we thought we should be able to find out what was happening.

In November, 1991, three students and five staff members came together for a workshop to examine barriers to women's participation in literacy programs. By the end of the day we concluded that violence and a lack of support in women's lives were the two major barriers that stop them from coming to literacy programs.

We identified an action plan to encourage more women to participate in the program and three months later we had twenty women learners. However they were all referrals from two social service agencies in the city. We continued to wonder, "Where are the women from the immediate community?" and "Why aren't they coming to the Centre?"

The Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) was about to begin phase two of their research on women and literacy. Since we had participated in phase one, they asked us to become one of the twelve programs to carry out a woman-positive activity and document what happened as a result.

This came at an ideal time. We decided that our woman-positive activity would be to somehow connect with women in the community to find out why more of them were not participating in programs at the Centre. We had another workshop to decide exactly what we wanted to do. Participants in this workshop included two women learners and the Rabbittown staff.

At one point in the workshop we divided into small groups to make a collage of photos from different events and activities at the centre and to write captions for the photos. After each group shared their collage, everyone was asked to identify key words that reflected the feelings and emotions evident in the photos. This led to a discussion and recognition of the strong sense of belonging, support, and comfort people feel here at the Centre.

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Frances Ennis with Rabbittown staff 73

opinions about women's lives in general. When women responded, the Rabbittown staff had a clear sense that most of them were talking about their own lives and their own personal experiences. If their senses are correct then there are a number of women out there who are personally ready to make a shift.

The objective in doing this work was to find out why more women were not participating in programs at the Centre. With the confirmation of some earlier thinking and the learning of many new things, the next logical step for the Rabbittown Learners Program was to encourage more women's involvement. They intended to start this process by producing a pamphlet outlining the survey results. They would then follow-up with each woman, either individually or in small kitchen meetings, to review the pamphlet and discuss the survey results. Any expression of interest would facilitate further follow-up in the hope that this would encourage involvement in programs at the Centre or the development of new initiatives to meet the specific needs of these women.

With the closing of the Rabbittown Learners Program in October 1992, these plans were put on hold. At that time the staff decided they would no longer work on a volunteer basis. As one of them said in their press release:

> As of Friday I'm unemployed. Yet I have people depending on me to help them learn to read and write. After nearly a year of uncertainty I feel I can't keep up the pretence that all is well, that we can give the people what they need when we can't even keep up with papers and pencils.

The closing of the program attracted much local media attention which was followed by a groundswell of public and private concern. The program opened again on March 8, 1993, with enough funds from federal and provincial government agencies, private donations, fundraising events, and the Newfoundland and Labrador Literacy Coalition to continue operations for seven months.

The intense effort required for fundraising detracts from learning and certainly limits the possibility of carrying out extra activities such as the full completion of this particular woman-positive activity. When projects like this are delayed, at best inefficiencies are created and at worst there is a loss of interest.

What was produced

Frances Ennis used the raw material produced by the Rabbittown staff to write an article, "Uncovering fear and isolation in Rabbittown: A woman-positive literacy project." It is included in Women in literacy speak.

"We enjoyed talking together: no agenda, just being ourselves. It felt so good to just meet and talk about what mattered to us.

Women's Group
The Saint John Learning Exchange
Saint John, New Brunswick

The Saint John Learning Exchange is a rare example of an intensive, community-based program in New Brunswick. Like the rest of the province, the city of 90,000 also has a volunteer Laubach Literacy Council and college adult basic education classes. The Learning Exchange mandate is to assist adults and youth to achieve literacy and other skills individually tailored to their training, employment, and life needs.

Opened in 1984, the Learning Exchange offered five different programs at the time of the research. The CORE program, which focuses on adult literacy, includes the Community Academic Services classroom funded by the New Brunswick government and private business. The CORE has fifty participants. Three full-time animators work with small groups, offering both full-time and part-time learner-centred instruction. Another five animators work in the Occupational Knowledge (OK) program. Here, thirty young adults, aged 18 to 24, focus on work-related reading, writing and math skills, and basic computer literacy. They gain experience of different types of work through job exposures and a high number are successful in securing permanent work. Recently two classes for adults over 24 were added to the OK program. Learnex, an adult-oriented program with a staff of two, concentrates on workplace literacy and rewriting services.

Two other programs focus on school children. Two former Learning Exchange students work in the Stay In School program, visiting schools in the area to talk with students who want to continue their education but for a variety of reasons are feeling discouraged. The Homework School operates from 4 until 7 p.m. four days a week. Three coaches are available for students in grades 6 to 9 who use the community space to study and get help with their homework.

There are also two full-time counsellors and four administrative staff who work out of the store-front operation in downtown Saint John. The program shares its city-owned three-story building with the City's

Saint John
Learning
Exchange
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Station A
Saint John, NB
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"I think we'll obviously want women's groups to continue and maybe there'll be all sorts of them. We might open every door and find there's a group of women sitting there! I think inevitably it will become more political — because it is so empowering. . . . I guess I would like to see women in our program really be taken seriously and as equals by men. It's a universal thing. . . . My vision is that the world will change and that women will get their rights.

Marion Wells, Interview 2

"We had in June a week-long workshop to train staff and one of our afternoons was spent on CCLOW and talking about women's issues. . . . We have another staff member who has taken it upon herself to run a youth group for women 18 to 24. . . . Our male staff [are] supporting us as well and wanting to do their own thing. They developed a sexual harassment policy over the past while. I think that everything that we've done has only helped us toward continuing our [woman-positive] vision even more. The only hindrance is time.

Mary Snow, Interview 2

craft program, the New Brunswick Association for the Deaf, a job finding club, and a seniors aid agency.

Volunteers make up the community board, act as buddies for youth participants in the OK program, and work on special events. They are not involved in tutoring. Funding for the different programs comes through federal, provincial, and municipal governments, with some private and public donations.

The Learning Exchange has a holistic approach to education, believing that each individual who enters the centre should have the opportunity to explore and work towards fulfilling, their own learning goals. There are no standardized entrance requirements or curriculum. Students work anywhere from basic literacy up to grade 9 proficiency without being labelled by their past academic experience. Approximately ten percent of the current participants are English as a Second Language students.

The Learning Exchange staff of twenty-two has eighteen women and four men. The participants vary widely, from a majority of men to a majority of women at any one time. The strongly learner-centred, humanistic approach taken by the program means that each participant is treated as an individual with particular strengths, needs, and life experiences. The centre emphasizes the social nature of learning, ensuring that participants feel welcomed, accepted, and supported. There is a strong sense of mutual support in the small groups that clearly crosses differences in age, sex, and experience.

Involvement in the CCLOW research project

Marion Wells, the executive director of the Learning Exchange, first heard about the CCLOW research project when she attended a meeting in Toronto. After reading the report from the first phase, she approached an animator and program counsellor with the idea of exploring the program's participation. Donna Lynn McNulty and Mary Snow attended the first national workshop and the Learning Exchange later decided to participate in the research with Mary Snow and Marion Wells acting as the two contact women.

Following some intensive discussion and reflection, both Mary and Marion became interested in exploring the concept of woman-positive within the context of their program philosophy and practice. Given that they already identified many activities and incidents that they felt were strongly positive for women in the program, they felt they wanted to understand in what ways women, as "women," might be distinguished from women, as "learners."

"The more we met, the more we talked about our feelings. We felt safe expressing our feelings in the group.

When one of us had a problem that was worrying her, we would offer our support. Some women have nobody they can talk to. A women's group gives us a place where we feel less isolated.

We all want to keep meeting. We feel proud of ourselves and we feel less alone.

Women Getting Together. (1992). Saint John: Saint John Learning Exchange

"As the project continued, I realized my ideas were changing about how to be more woman-positive. I had always thought that if I was going to do something that would assist women, it would have to have a big agenda — doing something that concretely moved toward solving violence, incest, housing problems. It had to be organizing a Take Back the Night march, or setting up a transition house, or hiring a counsellor to deal specifically with childhood sexual assault memories. I hadn't thought that woman-positive might mean something less political, less active and organized.

Marion Wells, "The politics of talking"

The woman-positive activity

Mary asked four women from the CORE program if they would be interested in participating in a women-only discussion group. After hearing about the research and Marion and Mary's interest in exploring what it means to be woman-positive at the Learning Exchange, they began to meet regularly, usually once a week for about two hours. They talked about their lives, sharing experiences and exploring different ideas.

Mary and Marion want to continue with this group as it has become a very positive part of the program for all six women. They also want to continue exploring what they are learning about "woman-positive." They plan to organize some information sessions with their colleagues and other students to share what they discovered and to discuss different points of view on the possible consequences of focussing on women within the program. Some key words they have already identified include loyalty, isolation, and caregiver.

This is what happened

The group grew in several ways. This was not in terms of size but in terms of what the women became. They went from being a loosely knit group to a very harmonious and close group. They learned about each other and about themselves. They discovered that they all talked, all of the time, about women's interests and issues. Since they had given themselves no parameters at all, nor any guidelines for their conversations, their discussions flowed completely spontaneously. Much of the time they laughed at things they had done, or that had happened to them, sometimes describing events from years ago, sometimes relating recent things they found funny.

Little by little the women became closer to each other. When the group first started they were interested in the idea of a women's group. As they began meeting on a regular basis, they became more and more interested in each other. Since they didn't have a topic or a program of any kind, they were simply six women talking about whatever came up. They were amazed at how natural it felt. Across the varied boundaries of education, income, and family support, they became a small band of women who enjoyed each other's company as they travelled together without maps or navigation or defined goals. They shared thoughts, listened and sympathized, and sometimes explored a little bit. They discussed some of their problems and possible solutions, told stories about themselves and their lives, and all of them frequently thought about the group in-between meetings.

The entirely natural relating and responding which occurred was a surprise, especially to Marion and Mary. It was such an eye-opener: how

The politics of talking: Doing "woman-positive" in a learner-centred literacy program

Marion Wells
Saint John Learning Exchange, Saint John, NB

When I first became involved in CCLOW's action research project involving woman-positive activities, I was interested in discovering what women in other programs might be doing that we weren't. I read the term — woman-positive — and I was intrigued. As executive director of the Saint John Learning Exchange and a self-identified feminist, I felt rather pleased with the track record in our literacy program. I felt we were responsive to women's concerns and maybe I was looking for affirmation of that.

I don't think I have ever been unduly smug about what we were doing in the program, though. In fact I had several times questioned whether we were doing enough for women learners. My staff usually fielded my questions with well-put responses. They argued for a humanistic, equality-based learning and social environment, and we always tried to provide that.

My doubts about whether we had a good focus for meeting women's needs centred on whether we helped women solve their problems. Primarily, I saw women as victims — particularly undereducated and poor women. It is also true that I saw them as extraordinarily brave and very determined as they packed their kids off to babysitters or to school to put in three to six hours a day at the Centre. And I knew most of them were enormously social creatures in class and in the hallways, just as I am. I observed them both helping each other and giving moral support to the men in the groups. The social environment we nurture involves giving moral support generously. Women and men offer friendships which frequently cross gender boundaries. Men in the groups also give encouragement to women, as well as to their male comrades.

A lot of problem-solving takes place in our learning groups. Back then, when we were beginning to get to know CCLOW, I was satisfied that we were for the most part giving women learners what they needed from a literacy/basic education program. But I did always wonder whether we should have some women-only activities. Even though I thought we were already woman-positive, I wondered about our responsibility to help women deal with violence, sexual abuse, and lack of power.

Our counsellor does one-to-one counselling and refers women to agencies for help with specific problems. Perhaps, I thought, we should also be giving women

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comfortable they all felt, how much they all looked forward to meeting again. Neither Mary nor Marion could think of many other situations in which they felt such an absence of tension.

When something serious came up, the woman with the problem received a lot of gentle support from the others. They also had generous amounts of fun. They cried with laughter at one woman's story about responding to a friend's call for company at midnght. She had to take an oven-prepared turkey with her because her husband would only let her go if she cooked it there. The women reminisced about teenage adventures with boyfriends. They talked a lot about their children and about women family members.

No agenda, no plan, no beginning, middle or end, no prescribed rules of conduct. Nobody ever said, "What should we be doing?" or "What is this for?" No one hogged the time: there seemed to be some kind of unspoken guideline of equal time being given to everybody. Perhaps this was the natural rhythm of casual conversation when there is no stress or particular time constraint. Why was there no stress? This needs to be looked at. And why did just talking about themselves in this instance feel so satisfying?

What was produced

The women's group produced an eight-page booklet with photographs, called Women Getting Together! The booklet tells what happened when they started the women's group and is available from the Saint John Learning Exchange. As well, Marion wrote an article, "The politics of talking: Doing 'woman-positive' in a learner-centred literacy program." It is included in Women in literacy speak.

"This booklet tells what happened when we started a women's group. The women's group is a very positive thing for all of us involved."

"We decided to do something about sexual harassment. Men and women put together a sexual harassment policy. We also started a women's group.

Women's Group
Toronto ALFA Centre
Toronto, Ontario

The Toronto Adult Literacy for Action (ALFA) Centre is an independent community-based program with a mandate to help adults upgrade their reading, writing, and numeracy skills. In addition, ALFA addresses other needs such as possibilities for job training programs and providing referrals to other agencies. ALFA secures its funding from a variety of public and private sources.

The program, located in a community centre in the north-west part of the City of Toronto, began in 1985. Census information at that time indicated a need for a literacy program in this area of Toronto. Supported by church organizations, a group of educators from outside the community organized and sponsored the program. Currently ALFA's board of directors is made up entirely of students and tutors, along with one staff member.

ALFA students are primarily of Afro-Caribbean background. There are a few special needs students. All ALFA students speak English. The majority are 30 to 40 years old. Approximately sixty percent are male, forty percent are female, and most have children.

The staff, who hold four full-time and one part-time positions, operates as a collective. They organize, train, and oversee the work of sixty volunteer tutors who are primarily white middle-class women. All students in the program meet once a week with a tutor. Some students also participate in drop-ins or small groups for additional learning time.

Involvement in the CCLOW research project

Tannis Atkinson, a staff member, was interviewed in phase one. After reading the summary of the first phase, Discovering the strength of our voices, the staff collective decided they wanted to participate in the research. The program was in the midst of strategic planning and anti-discrimination work and hoped the research process would provide support for dealing with some issues within the program. Sexual

Toronto ALFA Centre
1900 Davenport Rd
Toronto, ON
M6N 1B7

"The women wrote about the group and this is what they said:

"I think that the ALFA women group is done me a lot of good since I am come for about a month now. It is help me lot. It help to meet other people. I enjoy the women group."
by Elaine

"I think the group is very interested. I liked the group. I enjoy coming to the women's group to eat and to talk and to listen to Davie."
by Moisley

"I started the group and it is great and I enjoy it. I look forward to come to it. The lady group is good and it is very friendly and I hope it continue. I find myself improvement. I wish there is more day."
by Doreen

"I think the women group was very good. I hope to continue because I like to come to read and write. Also the teacher is very nice so that she bring food and she kind."
by Davie

Pamphlet #1: We formed a women's group at ALFA, Toronto: Toronto ALFA Centre

harassment, racism, and cultural differences are real issues for participants at the Centre. A group of students and tutors began to develop an anti-racism policy and part of their work will include how to implement the policy.

Sexual harassment at the Centre, and violence and/or lack of support in the home, have kept many women from participating at ALFA. A women's group was formed to provide a safe place for women to upgrade their literacy skills. The group meets every Tuesday afternoon from one to three. When it first came together, the group took on a supporting role and most of the time was spent on discussing specific incidents of harassment and issues of common concern. This worked well for a couple of weeks, but the women also wanted to develop their reading and writing skills. Amele Zewge, the staff person working with the women's group, looked for curriculum materials that dealt with issues the women identified in their discussions.

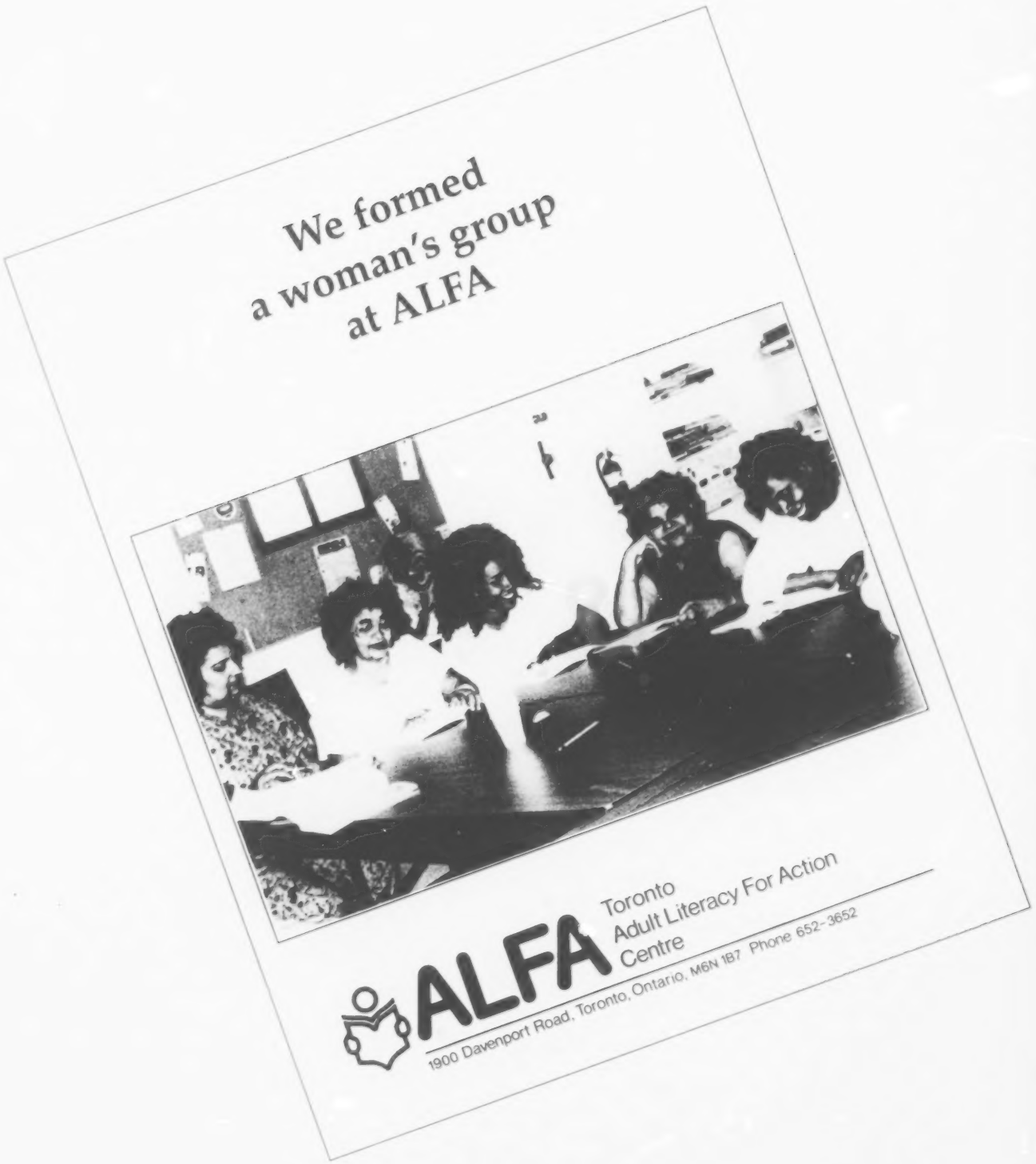
The woman-positive activity

As their woman-positive activity, ALFA decided to document what happens in an organization when it decides to provide a safe place for women to upgrade their literacy skills. Tannis and Amele started the process by asking each staff member to write their perception of why ALFA wanted to do a woman-positive activity and why they wanted to form the women's group. Amele asked each woman in the group to write about why she thought it was important to have the women's group. Several months later she asked the women to respond in writing to the same question.

Staff encouraged mixed-sex groups in the program to do similar writing with the question, "What do you think of the idea of having a women's group?" Discussion about the women's group had already begun in one of the mixed-sex evening groups. Some of the questions which male students asked were, "What is sexual harassment?", "Does a woman mean no when she says no?" and "Why is there a women's group and not a men's group?" The content of these discussions and the writings originating from them became the basic documentation for the research.

This is what happened

In April of 1992, Dharini Abeysekera, another staff member, initiated a follow-up discussion in the mixed-sex group. Students were asked to talk about the question, "Should women have their own group?" and to write down their thoughts. Out of the twelve students in the group only about seven of them wrote. There were mixed reactions about the women's group. Some supported the women's group and made comments like, "Yes, women need privacy, they can have their own group." Some claimed to have heard nothing about this before (although


We formed
a woman's group
at ALFA
ALFA
Toronto
Adult Literacy For Action
Centre
1900 Davenport Road, Toronto, Ontario, M6N 1B7 Phone 652-3652

they were part of the original discussion) and wondered, "Why a women's group?" Some were unhappy but did not say why.

Another significant development was that ALFA formed sexual harassment and anti-racism committees. There were three male students and one female staff on the sexual harassment committee. As their initial step, they put out a statement on sexual harassment, which was posted all around the Centre. The anti-racism committeee included one student, one tutor and one staff member. This committee just recently produced a draft statement and a policy.

The women's group continues to meet and work actively on reading, writing, and math. There are five active members and they hope to get more women into the group in the coming months. They also hope to be able to publish some of the women's writing in the future.

What was produced

The staff at ALFA put together four pamphlets that talk about this research:

- Why do women need a women's group?
- What happens in our women's group?
- What do people say about the women's group?
- What is sexual harassment?

They are reproduced in Women in literacy speak. They also published two books focusing on women: One woman's struggle and Not a bed of rose.

"When we first talked about having a women's committee at Beat the Street, many women thought it was a bad idea. After the first meeting, all the women who came wanted to have another one.

Women's Committee
Beat the Street
Toronto, Ontario

Beat the Street began in 1985 to provide a place for people connected with the street to develop their literacy skills. It is a program of Frontier College and is funded through the college by various government sources and private donations. It is supported by an independent advisory committee and is located in the downtown section of Toronto, Canada's largest metropolitan area.

Beat the Street is the only literacy program in Toronto organized by street people for street people. Most students live close to the centre but some travel an hour and a half on the subway to participate. The students are young, aged 18 to 24.

There are twenty volunteer tutors and three staff in the program. Reflecting the commitment to peer tutoring and support, most of the staff members and some of the tutors are former or present-day street people. The staff organize and train tutors and provide counselling support for students. The tutors work with students on the street or at the centre. The program provides information and referral on issues such as housing and health.

Most people who live, work, or are connected with the street in any way, live a life of violence. This is particularly true for women. A woman on the street feels she must have a boyfriend for protection and to avoid loneliness. Many women turn to prostitution because their boyfriends often threaten them with statements like, "If you want to keep me for a boyfriend make me money."

The violence experienced on the street doesn't simply end because people decide to participate in a literacy program. While no form of violence or sexual harassment is tolerated at Beat the Street, it sometimes occurs. This makes women feel unsafe at the Centre and as a result some do not participate. In January 1992 there were fifty-one male and seven female students at Beat the Street.

Another reason women don't participate in the program is they feel

Beat the Street
85 Shuter St
First Floor
Toronto, ON
M5B 1B3

"Living on the Streets of Toronto

It is very hard living on the streets of Toronto
Because it is not like Halifax. More shit happens in Toronto.
I had one guy come up to me to work on the street.
But I said no to him
because you can get AIDS by working on the street.
And I get into fights on the streets.
And people ask me what am I doing in a place like this
But I tell them to leave me alone.
They all tell me to go back home.
I do not know Toronto yet.
People gave me money to buy some food and place to stay.
Sometimes they ask me what the money is for and I tell them.
And one guy gave $20.00
for something to eat and place to stay.
And one guy was going to kill me
if I did not work on the street
And some of the students at Beat the Street help me
with things like my math and english and places to stay.

Shelley

Recipes for political action, Toronto: Beat the Street, p. 5

that their value isn't determined by their level of education. Instead their value comes from how they look, act, and dress, and from how much they support their boyfriends financially, emotionally, and educationally — for example, his literacy needs are considered more important than hers.

Involvement in the CCLOW research project

Robin Silverman Allcorn, assistant coordinator at Beat the Street, was concerned about the lack of women's participation in the program. Robin organized a meeting for women to discuss their needs in the Centre and they decided to form a Women's Committee. The committee would function as a support group, work to make Beat the Street a safe place for women, and encourage more women to participate in the program.

Robin heard about the CCLOW research project through the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy, the local umbrella organization, when she phoned to find out whether any programs had developed policies for dealing with sexual harassment. She contacted CCLOW to find out if Beat the Street could be involved. The Women's Committee felt they could benefit from networking with other women across the country. They wanted to find out if women in other programs shared their concerns.

The woman-positive activity

Tuesday nights were set aside for women at Beat the Street. On regular Tuesday evenings the women worked on developing literacy skills. On the last Tuesday of the month they cooked and shared a meal together before discussing business.

The group decided to write about what happened at Beat the Street when they formed the Women's Committee. The women kept daily journals about their experiences in the program. In addition, they developed a book that includes writings, photographs, and art work about significant things that have happened in their lives and in the program since the Women's Committee started.

This is what happened

The Women's Committee did a lot for the self-esteem of the women at Beat the Street and changed how they felt about each other. It gave the women a place to be with other women, a chance to learn without boyfriends, or men trying to get a date. It gave the women a chance to understand that they were not alone, that there were other women who had similar experiences.

The beginning of the Women's Committee made it clear how prevalent sexual harassment, sexual assault, and emotional abuse were at the Centre. At the meetings, women talked about incidents that had happened to them, and how they had been afraid to do anything for fear of further retaliation. The women talked about what they could do to

"Women forgotten

Why does our society so often fail to meet the needs of women? . . .

Every winter women either die on the street or become very ill due to sleeping on the street. . . .

Are we so wrapped up in our own lives that we can't find time to remember many are not fortunate enough to have a warm place to go to at night? Why has our society forgotten that these women need warmth not only for their bodies but also for their spirit?

We would like you to look at the things that drive women to the streets and the barriers that keep them there. Some of these are abuse in women's lives and systems that are unable to meet the needs of women. . . .

Last week a shelter evicted an older woman to freeze to death in a stairwell and people all remembered she had some money in her pocket. **I wonder how many people remembered her name.**

Pat

Recipes for political action, Toronto: Beat the Street, pp. 24-25

make sure they were really protected. They talked about procedures to back up policies so that they really worked for the protection of the women.

Sharing experiences led the women to questions such as:

- What happens when women are sexually assaulted or harassed?
- What rights do women have?
- How will the organization respond?

The Women's Committee set about to find out what other programs had done around the issues of sexual assault and harassment. They wanted to develop a policy that would include procedures that staff would be required to follow in cases of sexual assault and harassment at the Centre. The group wanted to work with a feminist lawyer who had experience helping organizations to develop these policies. They planned to present the policy and procedures to the administration. They learned that there is a lot of resistance to dealing with harassment and sexual assault.

Not all of the women in the program were able to come to the Women's Committee. Some of the women who did not participate in the committee were angry that it existed. Many were not participating because their boyfriends felt threatened. He did not know what she was talking about and who she was talking to. It threatened his control in the relationship. Some of the women in these relationships did eventually join the group.

When the Women's Committee first started there was some violence and lots of aggressive behaviour from male students in the program. They clearly felt threatened by the Women's Committee, and would say things like, "Oh, you're going to have your women's bitch session tonight." Some men were opposed to the women's night because they felt excluded. Men also said that the women had "stolen" a night from them, because Tuesdays and Wednesdays had previously been drop-in nights for anybody. In fact, the Women's Committee began meeting on Tuesday nights because nobody had been attending on Tuesdays.

Despite this, the women in the program began to see some changes. Some men became more aware of the issues women face and even began to talk about them. A few men began to realize why women needed a time to be together and why women needed a safer environment.

The program was changed by the presence of the Women's Committee: it is a better place. Women are not mistreated in the Centre in the way that they were before women's night began. The men know that they cannot come in and grab a woman or touch her breasts. This has made it a safer, friendlier environment for women. There are still men

RECIPES FOR POLITICAL ACTION
DUNDAS ST.
YONGE ST.
RELATIONSHIPS
EQUALITY
FEMINISM
ANGER
HOMOPHOBIA
RACISM
VIOLENCE
RIGHTS
TORONTO'S WASTE
Beat the Street
Women's Committee

who want to call women names and treat women badly. They may not have been changed, but they know that kind of behaviour is unacceptable at the Centre.

The Women's Committee has also made it a lot easier for people of colour or gay men and lesbians to come to the Centre. The Women's Committee tried to develop non-discrimination policies. The women feel they have learned a lot, grown, and become stronger.

What was produced

In March 1993, The Women's Committee held a book launch to celebrate Recipes for Political Action. The forty-two-page book includes stories written by the Women's Committee, photographs, and some of the artwork done by women at Beat the Street. Excerpts are included in Women in literacy speak.

"We came together to talk about our lives and write our stories.

Women's Group Action Read Guelph, Ontario

Action Read is the only community-based literacy program in Guelph, a city of 86,000 people that is 100 kilometers west of Toronto. Action Read began in 1987 as a division of the Centre for Employable Workers. It became an independent program in 1991, electing its first volunteer community board in February 1992. At the same time, it adopted the Movement for Canadian Literacy's mission statement put forward by the Learners' Action Group of MCL. This means Action Read has fifty percent learner representation on all committees. The board is trained in and uses consensus decision making and conflict resolution techniques.

Action Read is located in a storefront just off one of the main downtown streets. Its mandate is to provide literacy services for adults who need them. Their pamphlet states, "We believe that the learner knows best what their needs are. The learner sets goals and chooses materials which are personally relevant to them. This provides the basis for the work they do." Action Read receives funding from the Ontario Ministry of Education, the National Literacy Secretariat, Ontario Women's Directorate, and the United Way.

There are five full- and part-time staff who work as a collective at Action Read. All are women and they have all become members of the national Feminist Literacy Workers' Network. One woman coordinates approximately fifty-five learner/volunteer tutor one-to-one pairs and small groups. One woman does the administration. Another woman works with the Family Literacy program. One woman assists with all these and with special projects that arise. One woman, Anne Moore, coordinates a women's writing project that has produced a book. Action Read has formed a company — Garlic Press — to publish the works of adult new readers.

Many of the students at Action Read are long-time residents of Guelph who stay with the program for two or three years. Some of the students work for wages, some have recently become unemployed, some

Action Read
Suite 206
20 Fountain St
Guelph, ON
N1H 3P2

"Our group

Belonging to a women's group is really great for me. Without the ability to spell and pronounce a lot of words I had the feeling of not belonging anywhere in the working world. The group gives me strength and courage to go on. When I hear of other women's struggles of literacy I don't feel alone. I know that I have a lot to learn and I'm ready and willing. I feel that I have a lot to give.

When I am in a mixed group I feel more fearful to speak up or get relaxed. Men have a way of making me feel inferior and I feel like I'm melting in my chair. There is not as much talk about ourselves when there are men there. I'm not saying that there shouldn't be a mixed group it's just that if I had a choice of both I'd join the women's group first. Sometimes there is too much competition in a mixed group.

The women's group that I am involved in now has given me more hope to fulfill my dream of being an important worker in the field that I love to work in, of doing craft and helping people.

By Monique Beaulieu

Women: Where have we been? Where are we going? Guelph: Garlic Press, p. 18

have been unemployed for a long period of time, and some receive disability pensions or social assistance. A few students focus on English as a Second Language, although school board continuing education programs are the primary source of those classes in Guelph. About fifty percent of the students are women. Closer to seventy-five percent of the tutors are women. The age of the participants seems to be predominantly 35 to 45 years.

Involvement in the CCLOW research project

Anne Moore received a notice about CCLOW's women and literacy research in the mail. She attended a public discussion of the first phase in Toronto in the spring of 1991. After this, she became the first program worker to contact CCLOW about participating in the second phase. After many years of working in community-based literacy programs, Anne was interested in spending some time reflecting and writing about her experiences of trying to work in woman-positive ways.

The woman-positive activity

Anne discussed the research with the women in the staff collective and with the women in the women's writing group that was just beginning. She played them a tape that was produced during the first phase of this research and they agreed to take part. Monique Beaulieu, a participant in the women's group and a student active in the program on many levels, became the second contact woman for the project.

The women staff at Action Read identified several activities that they had already had planned for the year ahead. There was the women's group itself and the collection of writing they planned to publish by its members. They also planned a second book about one woman's experience of abuse and survival during her childhood. Overall, the staff try to incorporate a woman-positive approach in all the program activities.

Anne was personally involved in an on-going dialogue with a woman literacy worker in another community. They were exploring some of the difficult questions raised by the ways in which literacy and abuse become overlapping areas of concern for women staff, volunteers, and students in programs.

As part of the CCLOW research, Monique planned to talk with students in the program about how they experience the women's group — either as members or non-members. One thing she wanted to find out was how students are affected by the strong bond created between the six members of the women's group.

Anne did some of the same exploring with staff. One of her questions was how having a women-only project affected the other

"I think many of us chose to work in literacy because we wanted to work in an alternative educational environment with women, where there is no standard of formal training, and it is not constrained by national professional associations.

But I wonder how many of us feel insecure and unable to insist on the value of our work for those very same reasons? If we can't value our own needs as women workers, how can we authentically value the needs of the women in our program?

This became clear when I realized that some group members were being obstructed from coming because of lack of space. Staff were used to putting up with the noise and inconvenience of lack of space and expected everyone else to. We would never expect to be given a classroom or confidential sound barriers to do our educational work like certified teachers.

Yet, the learners are the ones who really take the brunt of it all.

Anne Moore, "Taking space for woman-positive literacy work"

activities in the program; the one-to-one volunteer program, other small groups, the family project, and the probation and parole project. She wanted to spend some time reflecting on her own experiences as a woman staff member working with women students in a field where funding policies are not necessarily woman-positive. She was also interested in having some time to explore these issues with other literacy and social justice workers.

Anne wanted to focus on how violence has affected and continues to affect the group. She also hoped to write a short paper which might be published in literacy newsletters and journals, talking about the process of creating a women's group and the problems that arose. The staff interviews would be part of the material used to develop the paper.

This is what happened

The women's group continued as it had been before the CCLOW research began. During the period of the research, the group produced the two books planned before the research began.

Anne used the half day each week to record her thoughts and feelings about the group in a journal. Anne and Monique interviewed learners, tutors, and staff in the program. They asked questions about whether people felt differently about the program because there was a woman-postive activity going on. They also asked people to reflect on the words "woman-positive" and to give some sort of feedback.

Because Monique became busy with her own life, including a new job, she had to drop out of the research. Lynda Lehman, a staff person, took her place. Lynda and Anne discussed the issues that were emerging. In response to their observations they developed a plan for some immediate change and formulated three more questions that they would ask staff: Why was it so difficult to find a solution to the space issue? Are we able to meet the needs we perceive with existing resources? Why do we devalue our work?

Some of the changes Lynda and Anne decided to make involved reorganizing existing resources and initiating new resources. They formalized Lynda's role as a support person and occasional facilitator of the women's group. Staff applied for money to do a Sexual Assault Prevention workshop for members of the program. Action Read acquired a new space which included a room for on-site childcare which made it more accessible for the women's group. Men in the program started discussing the creation of a men's group. The tension among staff about space died down.

In her documentation, Anne tried to capture the chain reaction of questioning and changing that characterized the program from the

Taking space for woman-positive literacy work

Anne Moore
Action Read, Guelph, ON

I am a feminist who has worked for seven years in community-based literacy programs in southern Ontario. Last year I was hired to focus specifically on women, a first for me. I started the women's group for Action Read in March 1991. Its purpose was to create a women's group to focus on writing and to develop group skills among the women. I feel extremely lucky to be doing this work. What I did not expect was to see the resistance to women's programing. To my surprise I felt this resistance everywhere, including within myself.

In November, I became involved in an action research project with the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW), which gave me the time to document my experiences, to reflect on them and to share my reflections with women from eleven other programs across Canada. Since becoming involved in this project, two things have become strikingly clear. Woman-positive programing is essential in literacy programs. Women literacy workers doing this woman-specific programing need to be supported in their work by concrete structures and by opportunities to reflect with other women.

By beginning a dialogue with other women doing the same kinds of work I hope that I can lessen some of the isolation I feel in my work. This is a scary thing to do. The ideas in this paper are sometimes contradictory. I was reminded again while writing this of how complex women's experiences are and how we try to work with all these levels of complexity at once in literacy work.

After just a couple of months, my CCLOW journal entries started to alarm me. I saw myself being pulled between my job and my personal needs and often feeling snagged in between the two. I was trying to meet everyone's needs at once — and not meeting anyone's, especially my own. I began to ask questions. Why do I devalue my work? Why aren't there enough resources to do my work? Why don't I demand more? What was it I was trying to do and for whom? Why do I always underestimate the needs of women: my own, the group's and the staff's?

When I started the group for Action Read, my first challenge was to find a suitable location for the women's group. At the time, Action Read was on the fourth floor of a building where the "elevator man" was known to be abusive, especially to women who were poor. Complaints were made but nothing changed. I had no choice but to look for alternate space. With very little money, it was difficult to find a place. I finally heard of a community room in the basement of a

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time that the research began. It became apparent that a lot happened during the research year, much of which was a result of questions being asked.

What was produced

Anne wrote an article, "Taking space for woman-positive literacy work." It is published in Women in literacy speak. The program's Garlic Press also produced two books: Women: Where have we been? Where are we going? and Street mother.

"We decided to rewrite a pamphlet on sexual abuse so women like us can get the help we need.

Academic Upgrading Program
Brandon Friendship Centre
Brandon, Manitoba

Brandon is a city of 40,000 people in southwestern Manitoba. Referred to as the Wheat City, it serves a further 60,000 people who live in this rural region. The economy is based on farming and agricultural industries, supplemented by an Armed Forces base, provincial corrections, Assiniboine Community College and Brandon University.

The Brandon Friendship Centre considers itself a bridge between two cultures, between urban and non-urban settings. It provides programs that will meet the needs of Native people who are adusting to urban life. It also provides opportunities for Native leadership, for mutual understanding among different cultures, and for the community to be informed about Native issues.

The Centre currently works with Métis, Native, and non-Native members. Staff and program participants represent all three cultures equally. There are six men and six women on staff. They work with youth, alcohol and drug counselling, housing, traditional cultural celebrations, literacy, and job preparation and training programs.

The Friendship Centre also serves as a drop-in centre, contains a gift shop of arts and crafts, holds bingo and a range of recreational activities, and is involved in many community programs with other social agencies and organizations in Brandon. Core funding for the Centre comes from the federal Secretary of State, with project funding from both provincial and federal agencies.

The basic literacy program is student-centred and community-based. There are twenty students registered, with an average of twelve being present on any particular day. They have the option of attending full-time or part-time, four days a week. There are two full-time literacy staff, one working primarily one-to-one and the other working primarily with groups. Long-term, volunteer aides are often present to work with individuals on the reading, writing, and math required for outside courses such as small engine repair.

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A profile: Theresa

Theresa was only able to say that she had been abused. She couldn't or wouldn't say any more. After hearing the other women tell parts of their stories and talking about the issue of abuse from a non-personal perspective, however, she was able to tell me her story for the very first time.

Theresa said that she didn't know where to start so I suggested that she treat this as a writing assignment. We followed the steps that we use in the classroom for anything that needs to be written. The only difference was that she spoke and I scribed for her. Two days later, when it was completed, she held the finished piece in her hand. She told me that she had never been able to think about it before without the feelings overwhelming her. She had never really admitted the abuse to anyone because she couldn't put it into words. She was able to write about her feelings, talk about what had happened and ask questions.

While Theresa was able to tell her story for the first time, she also learned much about writing and the process of writing. . . . The writing that she did in her class assignments improved as a result of this in-depth story that meant so much to her.

Diane Eastman, "Gender, culture, and personal experiences that get in the way of learning"

Involvement in the CCLOW research project

Diane Eastman is the literacy instructor working with groups. She has been at the Friendship Centre for six years and has become interested in the particular experiences that women bring to class. During CCLOW's outreach work for the second phase, the coordinating researcher contacted Manitoba's adult learning specialist responsible for professional development, Robin Millar. Robin mentioned Diane and her program because she thought that the program at the Centre, being both stable and creative, would serve as an excellent site for long-term research.

Once Diane reviewed the report from the first phase, she talked with Gail Lanoie, the assistant executive director of the Centre. Both Diane and Gail came to the first national workshop with the idea of developing a women's group through the literacy program.

The woman-positive activity

Diane spent two months talking with women in the program and exploring different ideas. It became clear that there was a common interest among many of the women around issues of abuse, particularly childhood sexual abuse. Diane began to prepare herself for working with women on this issue, checking out available agencies in the community and reading about different counselling approaches and resources.

After a brainstorm session early in 1992, the women indicated that they would like to work with childhood sexual abuse by rewriting materials used by local agencies which were not accessible to women with less than a high school education. Four to six women began meeting one morning a week. Because of their interest and the extraordinary academic progress made by members of the group, the meetings were expanded to twice a week and then to every morning.

Diane was interested in exploring how both individual women and the group as a whole responded to this woman-positive initiative. She looked at how the other students in her program responded, particularly the male students who have also experienced sexual abuse. Some men's involvement occurred because the open classroom setting gave them peripheral access to the group without infringing on the women's feeling of safety.

Working with Gail, Diane also investigated how other staff, different working groups, and the board at the Centre responded to the woman-positive activity.

"BAL: Can you name three issues that you have become more aware of because of this project?

DE: The first is that it is absolutely essential that programs that resemble my program are more than just academic programs. That would be the first thing. Second, if you're going to offer help to somebody, don't offer them a pint when they need a gallon. If you're going to offer it to them, offer them everything that they need. Most of the people in my program have been to dozens of other programs — you name any program and I can tell you a couple students who've been in it. Everything, every piece of help they have ever been offered, has been piecemeal. . . . And third, if you're going to do it, do it from them, not for them. Do it from them and it'll be wonderful.

BAL: You had identified sexual abuse before the women got together, but they named it.

DE: . . . I made suggestions like: We could learn about welfare rights. We could learn about sports. We could learn about some health issues that you might have. . . . Then they brainstormed and it was then that they came up with it.

BAL: What do you think they would have done if you had suggested it?

DE: I think they would have all walked away. They would have just gone back and sat down and said, "No, I don't want to talk about that." I don't think they would have stayed with me for five minutes. Something that personal has to come from the person. It can't be forced on them.

Diane Eastman (DE) and Betty-Ann Lloyd (BAL), Interview 2

This is what happened

The women in the morning group — called "CCLOW" — concentrated on rewriting a brochure from an organization called AMAC (Adults Molested As Children). They all went through a lot of emotional turmoil during this time. A lot of ghosts came back to haunt them and, when finished, they decided to take a break from the subject. The women chose to learn needlepoint as their next activity and during this time they seemed to be integrating the recently-gained academic and social skills. During the next year, the women plan to review the rewritten brochure and take it to AMAC to discuss its possible distribution.

It seems clear that this woman-positive initiative has provided an excellent opportunity for the women involved. There was growth, healing, and understanding coming from the common experience of being in the group. The women began working more closely together.

Diane strongly encourages peer tutoring in the program and she noticed the women spent more time helping each other and the other members of the class. During regular class time they were more willing to share their time and themselves with the other class members. Because of this increased helping attitude, the women also showed a stronger commitment to their school work. When the rest of the class witnessed this new commitment it encouraged many of them to work a little harder.

Diane believes that the last few months of school were more productive and creative than usual. At the same time as the CCLOW group was working, another group began some writing. The creativity and productivity of this second group may well be the result of these two groups working in the same classroom.

Many of the other participants in the program also kept a close eye — and ear — on the women's work. Those in the CCLOW group explained what they were doing and kept others informed of the progress they were making. As they worked on a flip chart, others in the program would often come over to read what had been done during the sessions. This often generated discussions among the students. They would mention to the women what they thought on the subject and some of what they said seemed to influence the women's thinking.

Also, while CCLOW was working in a group, the rest of the class was quieter than usual. It seemed that, although they wanted to be able to hear the discussion, they also respected the women's work and wanted to give them the quiet required to think. The whole class saw the project as worthwhile. Some of the other women would have liked to join the group but couldn't, either because they were under a time pressure from a funding agency and felt they couldn't spare the time from regular

Gender, culture, and personal experiences that get in the way of learning: The need for core funding for adult literacy projects

Diane Eastman
Brandon Friendship Centre, Brandon, MB

A policy paper presented to the Literacy Office, Department of Education, Government of Manitoba and Board Members, Brandon Friendship Centre

Over the last twelve months, I have had the opportunity to focus on my academic upgrading work at the Brandon Friendship Centre from three very different perspectives.

I have participated in a two-year national action research project sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. With women from eleven other adult literacy and basic education programs across the country, I developed and implemented a woman-positive activity in my program. I facilitated a group of women students who rewrote, in clear language, a brochure outlining services for adults who had been sexually molested as children. As part of that research, I have been provided with resources to discuss and reflect on what happened with the women involved, with the other students, with the program, and with myself as a practitioner.

I participated in four week-long advanced training sessions for adult literacy practitioners organized by the Manitoba Literacy Office. During the time of this training, I facilitated a writing group of men and women students in order to examine what happened when I used formal, rather than experiential, approaches to student writing. My work in this course was strongly influenced by metacognitive — or meaning-making — approaches to learning and by the problem-posing teaching and learning philosophies of Paulo Freire.

I participated in a three-day workshop on Native Literacy Education sponsored by Okanogan College. During this workshop and through the writing assignment I completed later, I focused on the way in which academic programs can benefit from the introduction of cultural and life skills elements based on the individual and group needs of the students. These elements can become an integral part of academic programing through the use of theme units, but they cannot be pre-programed through standardized curriculum or skills-based approaches.

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academics, or because they were going through particularly chaotic times in their lives and could not continue in the program.

The participants in the literacy program vary in terms of sex and culture. At this time, there were more non-Native women than usual and they formed the core of the CCLOW group. The Native and Métis women were unable to attend for a variety of reasons. Diane feels that at another time, they might be the majority of those able to participate in group activities and the theme would be repeated. It also looks as though Native men might be in the majority in the future, which would lead to a different emphasis again.

During the time of the CCLOW group, some of the men in the class felt left out because they understand abuse as a human issue, not a women's issue. They acknowledged that women are abused more than men. However, they believed strongly that men have less chance to get help than women. They wanted a similar group set up for them in the classroom. Diane did not feel it was appropriate for her to lead the group and suggested different male staff and community members who might be approached. The men did not go forward with this, although they did begin to openly discuss the issue with the women in the class. This initiated many small group discussions both in class time and after hours that included talk on issues from abuse to AIDS to lifestyle.

In the end, the CCLOW group served as a starting point for many discussions. It provided a safe, open forum for discussing feelings. Some of the participants disclosed very personal information, and no one ever responded in any way that was insensitive or uncaring. The way the group pulled together to offer support and understanding without judgement seemed exceptional and gave Diane a very strong feeling of warmth toward her class.

What was produced

Diane developed a policy presentation for both the Manitoba Literacy Office and the Friendship Centre board, "Gender, culture and personal experiences that get in the way of learning: The need for core funding for projects." This policy paper is included in Women in literacy speak.

"We put together resource booklets based on our own experiences before we came to Pine Grove. We did it for ourselves and to help other women.

Academic Upgrading
Pine Grove Correctional Centre
Prince Albert, Saskatchewan

Pine Grove Correctional Centre in Prince Albert is Saskatchewan's provincial prison for women. It primarily houses women with less than a two-year sentence, although there are some federally-sentenced women at the facility. The average daily count of incarcerated women is about sixty-seven. Virtually all of the women who are inmates are First Nations, primarily Cree. About twenty percent of staff are of Native ancestry.

The director and deputy director at Pine Grove focus on providing activities in the institution that are both culture and gender specific. While they are clearly aware of the difficulties and contradictions inherent in being woman-positive and culture-positive where women are incarcerated, both Annette Neustaedter and Wanita Koczka understand their work as preparing women as effectively as possible for release. All the programs at the Centre focus on this goal.

Elizabeth Fry Society, an advocacy and support group for women in conflict with the law, provides a two-week compulsory Women Education program based on health issues. A compulsory two-week Addictions Program is in place. A Healing Circle — funded by Health and Welfare Canada/National Drug Strategy and facilitated by two aboriginal women — provides support for women dealing with histories of sexual and physical abuse and chemical dependency, and the connection between them.

The women inmates are required to spend their days involved in some form of specific activity. After completing the Women Education program and Addictions program, they work in the Centre facilities such as the kitchen and laundry, and do general cleaning of the Centre. Women also work in the shop that produces environment-friendly goods such as diapers, shirts, mocassins, back packs, sleeping blankets, and a variety of other sewn items.

The academic upgrading program is a voluntary option for women.

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"Priscilla

In the making of this resource book, I think back to the times I found myself in a new, strange city, not knowing where to reach for help when I most needed it. I hope this book will be of some use to others who find themselves in similar situations.

Phyllis

I wasn't too crazy about doing these booklets at first, and am still not crazy about them, but I understand where there could be a need for them. I guess if it helps someone to accomplish something, to help themselves, or to help someone else, then I could help. (My good deed for the day!) It's not that I don't like helping people. I guess it's just that I never thought of a need for one because it was never there for me. (The booklet) It does feel good knowing it might help someone.

Emma

My hope for this resource book is to enable other women to know where to turn in times of need and/or where to reach when other difficulties may arise in your everyday lives.

Sometimes our problems may need a professional's point of view or maybe just a little helping hand from someone who knows and cares. There are so many people ready to help.

Resource booklets

It runs from 8:45 to 3:30 from Monday to Thursday. At the time of the research there were eight women enrolled in the program, three working on their GED and five working at the grade 5 to 10 level. LaVera Schiele is the full-time instructor. The average age of the women involved in upgrading is similar to that in the general prison population, clustering around 26 to 28 and ranging from 18 to late 40s. The class is organized around individual study, small group projects, and workshops.

Involvement in the CCLOW research project

Wanita Koczka, the deputy director at Pine Grove, is provincial network coordinator for CCLOW in Saskatchewan. She met Betty-Ann Lloyd, the coordinating researcher for the women and literacy project, at the annual CCLOW conference held in Saskatoon in 1991. Both Wanita and Betty-Ann became excited about the possibilities for Pine Grove's participation, given its current philosophy.

The woman-positive activity

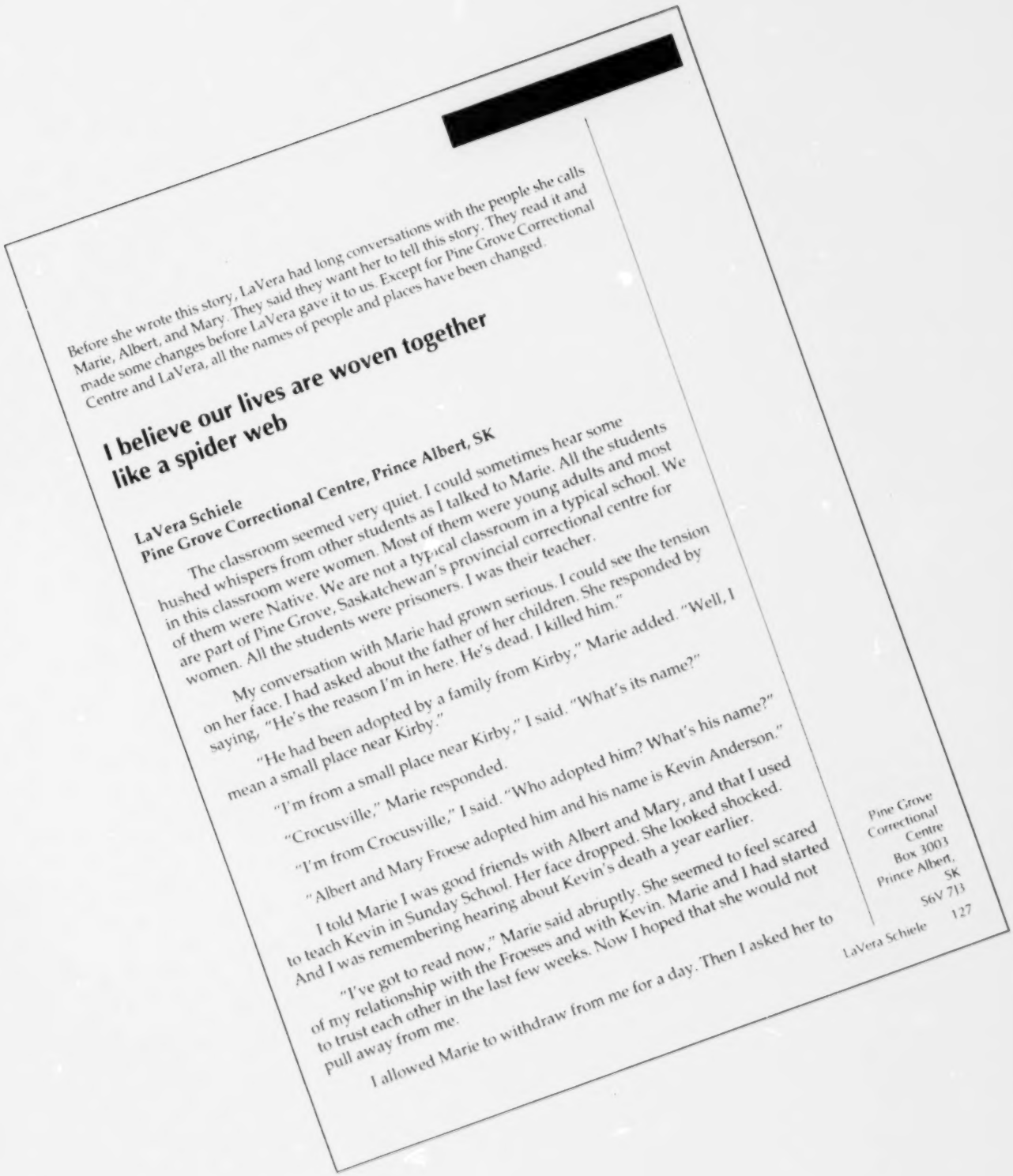
After discussions with Annette Neustadter, the Centre's director, and after LaVera Schiele was hired as program instructor, women at the Centre began to discuss possible activities. Eileen Gorman, the community training coordinator, attended the first national workshop with LaVera and they began to look at what women inmates identify as their needs once they leave Pine Grove. After talking with the women in the upgrading program, they decided to create crisis resource booklets for different regions of the province.

The women in the class wrote a crisis scenario that they were familiar with and then worked out what resources are, or are not, available in their communities to help women deal with such a crisis. They worked individually, as a group, and with the larger inmate population to identify both informal and organized sources of assistance.

This is what happened

This project was woman-positive for many reasons. First, it acknowledged that the everyday lives of many women in conflict with the law take place in a context of crisis. This is a reality for women that is often ignored by the justice system and by the government agencies set up to provide social services. Second, it acknowledged that the women themselves are expert not only at identifying the crises in their lives, but also at identifying what they need in order to deal with these crises.

Third, by giving women the option of writing the scenarios, the program acknowledged that their way of telling their story should be the authorized version of what happens in their lives. Fourth, it acknowledged that informal, peer networks of support are as important as social agency and charitable support. Fifth, it acknowledged that



Before she wrote this story, LaVera had long conversations with the people she calls Marie, Albert, and Mary. They said they want her to tell this story. They read it and made some changes before LaVera gave it to us. Except for Pine Grove Correctional Centre and LaVera, all the names of people and places have been changed.

I believe our lives are woven together like a spider web

LaVera Schiele
Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Prince Albert, SK

The classroom seemed very quiet. I could sometimes hear some hushed whispers from other students as I talked to Marie. All the students in this classroom were women. Most of them were young adults and most of them were Native. We are not a typical classroom in a typical school. We are part of Pine Grove, Saskatchewan's provincial correctional centre for women. All the students were prisoners. I was their teacher.

My conversation with Marie had grown serious. I could see the tension on her face. I had asked about the father of her children. She responded by saying, "He's the reason I'm in here. He's dead. I killed him."

"He had been adopted by a family from Kirby," Marie added. "Well, I mean a small place near Kirby."

"I'm from a small place near Kirby," I said. "What's its name?"

"Crocusville," Marie responded.

"I'm from Crocusville," I said. "Who adopted him? What's his name?"

"Albert and Mary Froese adopted him and his name is Kevin Anderson."

I told Marie I was good friends with Albert and Mary, and that I used to teach Kevin in Sunday School. Her face dropped. She looked shocked. And I was remembering hearing about Kevin's death a year earlier.

"I've got to read now," Marie said abruptly. She seemed to feel scared of my relationship with the Froeses and with Kevin. Marie and I had started to trust each other in the last few weeks. Now I hoped that she would not pull away from me.

I allowed Marie to withdraw from me for a day. Then I asked her to

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women can learn to trust their gut-level response, a response that is often spiritual and emotional as well as rational. It gave women space to talk and write about the quality as well as the quantity of their lives.

This conscious attempt to produce a holistic resource for women gave some women an opportunity to express the reality of their lives and what is, or is not, available to help them work with that reality. At the centre of the approach is the idea that perhaps it is not the women in conflict with the law who have failed to function in society, but society that has failed to provide women with a realistic context for their lives.

LaVera, Eileen, and Wanita identified several questions at the beginning of this process that continued to be important throughout the research. They included:

- How much attention is actually paid to women who tell the stories of their lives?
- When those stories are made available, how does both their own community and the larger society interpret the needs of women who have been in conflict with the law?
- Will this reflect conditions in general for women throughout society and will this project validate and reinforce the need for women in general to assert their own needs?

The resource booklets have received a great deal of attention from the community. Rather than having too little interest in the booklets, there are too few booklets available to meet the demand for them. Community schools in Saskatchewan have become involved in their distribution and some changes are being made as suggestions come in from different parts of the province. Perhaps the response of the women in the program might be summed up by Priscilla, one of the program participants: "In the making of this resource book, I think back to the times I found myself in a new, strange city, not knowing where to reach for help when I most needed it. I hope this book will be of some use to others who find themselves in similar situations."

What was produced

LaVera Schiele wrote a story that could be used as curriculum based on something that happened during the research: "I believe our lives are woven together like a spider web." It is included in Women in literacy speak, as are some excerpts from the resource booklets.

"We found that union-based literacy programs can empower women workers when they pay attention to women's lives.

Workers' Education for Skills Training
Saskatchewan Federation of Labour
Regina, Saskatchewan

Workers' Education for Skills Training (WEST) is a worker-controlled union program that operates with the cooperation of management in a variety of workplaces. Its goal is to give workers a chance to become more confident and self-determining members of their workplaces, their unions, and their communities. In four hours of classes each week, workers help other workers improve their reading, writing, and math skills. Because WEST classes benefit everyone in the workplace, classes run half on paid work time and half on the workers' own time.

The WEST project began in November 1989, when the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) received a grant from the National Literacy Secretariat to determine whether or not Saskatchewan union members needed or wanted literacy programing. Lori Stinson-O'Gorman was hired to design the model and conduct the study. Senior staff representatives, local executives, and union members were interviewed. The response was overwhelming. Those interviewed suggested that "rather than wasting time studying the problem, the SFL should do something about it."

After examining existing programs in Saskatchewan, in Canada, and in other countries, the Ontario Federation of Labour's BEST program was adopted as a model from which to develop an SFL program. Thirteen union members from six workplaces spent two separate weeks together, training as course leaders. During 1990-91, sixty-seven workers became active participants in classes. A second course leaders' training took place and seven more union members were trained as course leaders.

The program received funding for its feasibility study, a pilot project phase, and for materials development from the National Literacy Secretariat. The Saskatchewan Department of Labour also provides limited funding for the production of the course leaders' manuals, and in-kind support was received from the workplaces and unions involved.

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"From my involvement with the research, I have met many wonderful women from whom I have learned, among other things, that being a feminist means many things. It means being allowed to make choices — and then feeling comfortable with the choices we make. It means being accepted for who you are and what you believe in.

I learned that women all across Canada live the same kind of lives. Even though we're different races, different ages, different classes, we have a lot of common ground. We learned from each other and leaned on each other for support.

I learned from working with the other women that we all have a purpose in life and we are all connected in some way. No matter what we do as women, it is valuable and important and should be considered so. We have something to say and we should have room to say it. What we feel and experience counts.

Debbie Heagy, "Taking chances, making choices"

Lori was the full-time staff person for WEST, with space and support services provided by the SFL. The course leaders work as volunteers and their workplaces give them two to four hours of paid work release each week.

In the first training, three of the thirteen course leaders were women. Of the fifty-four students, approximately sixteen were women. In the second training, only one of the seven course leaders was a woman. Approximately thirty-four of the ninety-five current participants are women. Both course leaders and participants are representative of their workplaces. They include Native, Métis, white, and immigrant workers. The students' formal education ranges from none to grade 12 and their ages range from 18 to 58. The classes have a participatory critical approach to education. There are no standard curriculum, textbooks, or testing.

Involvement in the CCLOW research project

Lori read about the women and literacy research project in the Saskatchewan Literacy Network Newsletter. She immediately contacted CCLOW to expresss her interest since she could imagine several ways in which WEST could benefit from being involved. She was personally interested in understanding more about how women might be better served by the program. She also saw an opportunity for women course leaders to receive more support, training, and opportunities.

Debbie Heagy was a course leader with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) program with the Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon and Nicole Jessop was the course leader with the Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Union (RWDSU) program at the Imperial 400 Hotel in Regina. Debbie and Nikki, two of three women who participated in the first course leaders' training, became the WEST contact women for the research.

Early on they talked with Lori about why the proportion of women course leaders and participants was so small. It is true that, overall, women are less likely than men to work in unionized settings. Also, five of the workplaces involved in the program are male-dominated work sites, while three are female-dominated. However, after talking about the situation with other women, Debbie and Nikki decided there might be other reasons as well.

The woman-positive activity

As the woman-positive activity for WEST, Debbie and Nikki decided to look at what happens when women become involved in WEST as course leaders. They investigated how and why women became involved, exploring the course leaders' experiences of finding out about the program, taking the two one-week training courses, teaching in the

"The other major thing I learned from the connection with other women across the country was how violence is a part of all of our programs. The more we talked with everyone else, the more we saw how our problems here are the same as everybody's across the country. Violence and abuse and harassment just kept coming up. It's not only here but in courses all over. To this day that amazes me. I had never put it all together before.

At one time all three of the women that were in my class — three out of three — had been abused. I just thought that was a strange coincidence. When I talked to the other women in the research project and found out the high percentage of women that had been abused it was amazing. It was unreal.

When I came back from Toronto, I told the women that we had discussed this whole issue of violence and abuse and how women just like them in courses across the country are being abused. That was the biggest thing to my students, that they weren't the only ones, that they weren't alone.

Nicole Jessop, "Gaining confidence through woman-positive literacy research"

classroom, and ongoing support services. They not only explored their own and other women's experiences of being involved, they also talked with women in the different workplaces who did not become involved. They tried to work out whether there was anything WEST could do to encourage more women to participate.

They also investigated how unions and workplaces might be approached in order to attract more female-dominated or mixed female/male settings. They were particularly interested in the question of how WEST might become more woman-positive in the larger context of the Federation and in the particular context of skills education programs.

A second focus for this research was the response of the course leaders, both male and female, to the equality framework for the training and follow-up. The training not only included specific sections on anti-sexism and anti-racism, it also facilitated awareness of racism and sexism throughout the two week-long sessions. Ongoing changes have been made to the training manual to emphasize the need for an anti-discrimination approach that fits the needs of Saskatchewan workplaces.

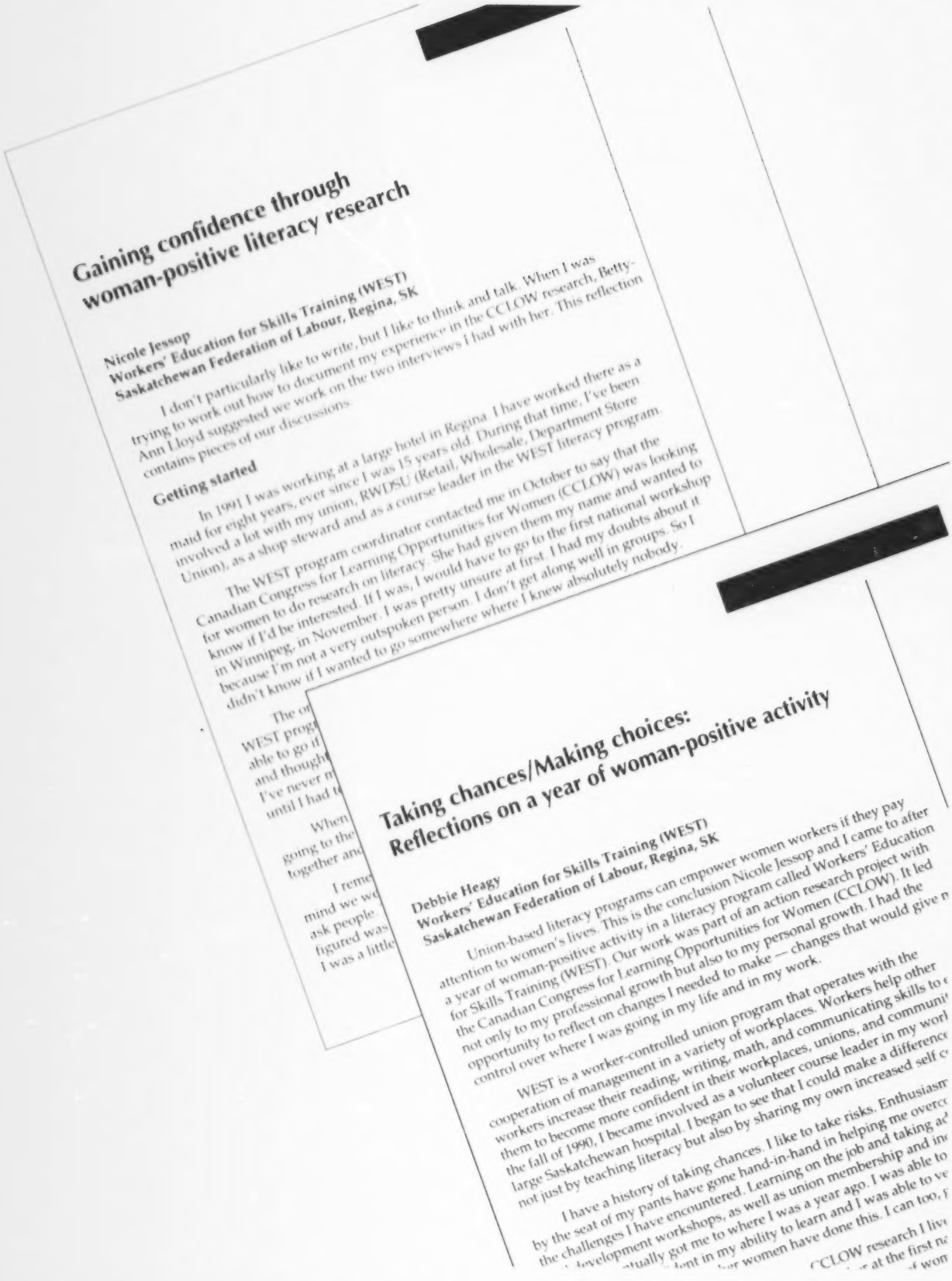
Debbie and Nikki interviewed one group of course leaders during their training and also talked with women and men who have completed their training and are now involved in classes. During these sessions they explored what effect this training approach had on the women and men who have been involved both as individuals and as members of families, communities, and workplaces.

This is what happened

Debbie and Nikki began by exploring their personal experiences of how and why they became involved as course leaders. They reflected back on the two one-week training programs and the way in which their participation affected their lives and the people close to them. They discovered that, as women, they encountered different problems such as difficulties in leaving their children to go for the training sessions and being alone in an unfamiliar setting with strangers.

One very positive result was the strong personal growth and the discovery of their strengths and abilities. Many opportunities arose directly due to their initial involvement in the WEST program. For example, after Lori left her job as WEST coordinator, Debbie was hired as one of two replacements.

Debbie and Nikki found that many women chose not to come to the WEST program in their workplaces because of lack of childcare or because of their responsibilities at home. Of those women who were in a program, there were still times when they missed classes for the same reasons.



Gaining confidence through woman-positive literacy research

Nicole Jessop
Workers' Education for Skills Training (WEST)
Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, Regina, SK

I don't particularly like to write, but I like to think and talk. When I was trying to work out how to document my experience in the CCLOW research, Betty-Ann Lloyd suggested we work on the two interviews I had with her. This reflection contains pieces of our discussions.

Getting started

In 1991 I was working at a large hotel in Regina. I have worked there as a maid for eight years, ever since I was 15 years old. During that time, I've been involved a lot with my union, RWDSU (Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Union), as a shop steward and as a course leader in the WEST literacy program.

The WEST program coordinator contacted me in October to say that the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) was looking for women to do research on literacy. She had given them my name and wanted to know if I'd be interested. If I was, I would have to go to the first national workshop in Winnipeg, in November. I was pretty unsure at first. I had my doubts about it because I'm not a very outspoken person. I don't get along well in groups. So I didn't know if I wanted to go somewhere where I knew absolutely nobody.

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Taking chances/Making choices: Reflections on a year of woman-positive activity

Debbie Heagy
Workers' Education for Skills Training (WEST)
Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, Regina, SK

Union-based literacy programs can empower women workers if they pay attention to women's lives. This is the conclusion Nicole Jessop and I came to after a year of woman-positive activity in a literacy program called Workers' Education for Skills Training (WEST). Our work was part of an action research project with the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW). It led not only to my professional growth but also to my personal growth. I had the opportunity to reflect on changes I needed to make — changes that would give m control over where I was going in my life and in my work.

WEST is a worker-controlled union program that operates with the cooperation of management in a variety of workplaces. Workers help other workers increase their reading, writing, math, and communicating skills to them to become more confident in their workplaces, unions, and communi the fall of 1990, I became involved as a volunteer course leader in my worl large Saskatchewan hospital. I began to see that I could make a difference not just by teaching literacy but also by sharing my own increased self c

I have a history of taking chances. I like to take risks. Enthusiasm by the seat of my pants have gone hand-in-hand in helping me overco the challenges I have encountered. Learning on the job and taking ad development workshops, as well as union membership and in tually got me to where I was a year ago. I was able to ve ent in my ability to learn and I was able to ve er women have done this. I can too, f

CCLOW research I live r at the first na of wom

When Debbie and Nikki interviewed the second group of course leaders during their training, the group included only one woman out of seven participants. Again, this was due to the male-dominated workplaces involved. This woman also had difficulty becoming involved because of family responsibilities. She was ridiculed by some co-workers because they could not understand how she could leave her child to attend the training sessions.

The reaction from the male participants varied when they were asked how WEST programs could be made more accessible to women. They agreed that women have more responsibilities in child rearing and housework, but had no suggestions for improvement. They agreed that it could be easier for men to be involved as an instructor in such a program because of the extensive time commitment. They also discussed how men in the workplace could encourage women to attend classes. The question " What about the men?" came up, even though it was obvious that the discussion was planned to focus on women.

The next stage of Nikki and Debbie's research was interrupted when Saskatchewan Education initially denied long-term funding to the program. The funding for the WEST program coordinator at the SFL was essential to maintain the existing level of programming. Financial cutbacks imposed on various unionized workplaces in Saskatchewan had also directly affected long-term commitments to the WEST program. It became apparent that the issue of literacy is not taken seriously enough. Also, changes in Debbie and Nikki's personal lives and the distance in miles between them made it difficult at times to stay focused on the research.

What was produced

Once continued funding was achieved, Debbie and Nikki decided to create a poster for use in the training program, in union offices and in the program classrooms. This poster is headed: "Union-based literacy programs can empower women workers if they pay attention to women's lives." It includes a variety of questions that indicate women's concerns. Debbie wrote a reflection about her personal growth and development through the research, "Taking chances/Making choices: Reflections on a year of woman-positive activity." Nicole used her two interviews to develop a similar reflection, "Gaining confidence through woman-positive literacy research." The two articles and the poster are included in Women in literacy speak.

" We did some writing that helped our children understand that what we do at school also includes our families.

Aboriginal Women and the Workplace
Keyano College
Fort McMurray, Alberta

Keyano College is located in Alberta's northeast corner. With a current population of 35,000, Fort McMurray experienced a population boom in the 1970s when the oil sands went into production. The economic base for the white community has always been oil, beginning in the 1920s. Before the oil development, Fort McMurray was a small Native community. The aboriginal population in and around Fort McMurray is primarily Métis, Chipewyan and Cree. They live in the city and in small communities and reserves in the region. Traditionally, aboriginal women have worked at minimum wage jobs, without access to the better-paying oil sands jobs.

Keyano College provides residence services for its student population, a population that clusters in age around 25 to 35. There are three campuses. Fort Chippeweyan provides services for an almost exclusively Native population. There is a campus on the outskirts of Fort McMurray that focuses on heavy industrial equipment training and is almost exclusively male. The central city campus includes courses in nursing, business, adult basic education, trades, college preparation and university transfer, the visual and performing arts, and community education. The board has given the college a strong mandate to focus on literacy and Native education.

Aboriginal Women and the Workplace is a 24-week program that began in October 1991, and ran until March 27, 1992. The program, funded by the Canada Employment Commission (CEC), aims to enhance the employability skills of aboriginal women by providing life skills and academic upgrading that will lead to the successful completion of the GED. Women must participate in a personal interview and pass an entrance test before they are accepted into the program.

Both major oil sands plants and many smaller employers require a GED from all job applicants. It is necessary, therefore, that women who want to be employed obtain that certification. However, most will not apply for positions at the plants because they are unable to make the kind

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"[The aboriginal women] were quite interested in my experience in being in a residential school as a white — and even amongst themselves they had such different experience of residential schools. Some of them loved it and some of them hated it. I was sort of somewhere in between there. So we all came from different positions on the same issue, but we did share a common ground. Also, we all had our children very young. All my kids are the same age as their kids. That became a much stronger common ground than the difference between being aboriginal or white. Having children drove a lot of conversation, discussion and thinking for writing.

Nancy Steel, Interview 2

"We talked at length about society's lack of support for women who become pregnant and who must make choices that are difficult, whether it be to get married, to abort the child, to carry and keep the child, or to carry and give the child to adoptive parents. What did not emerge from the discussion was a firm statement about the 'right' thing to do. What did emerge was a lament for the lack of support for women in their choice.

Nancy Steel, Journal

of childcare arrangements that would accommodate the shift schedules at Syncrude and Suncor.

At the time of the research, the program's instruction and the administration staff were all women, including the dean of Community and Upgrading Education (CUE), the program coordinator, two instructors, the adult literacy coordinator, and support staff.

Aside from providing adult basic education, CUE's primary function is to offer non-credit and credit programming, client-specific programming, Native and International Education, and community adult literacy programming. It has offered women-only programs in the past. New Worlds for Women, for example, is offered regularly. Programs such as Career Explorations, although not designated women-only, often end up with a women-only registration. Because the department is used to such courses, therefore, neither the college faculty nor the administration viewed the Aboriginal Women and the Workplace program as unusual or controversial.

Involvement in the CCLOW research project

In September of 1991, Nancy Steel, the literacy coordinator for the college, heard about the CCLOW research from an Edmonton colleague. She had for some time wanted to work with the issue of women and literacy. After reading Discovering the strength of our voices, the report from the first phase, she realized she wanted to participate. She approached Jeanne MacIntyre, the Native and International Education coordinator, to ask if a writing workshop might fit within the upcoming Aboriginal Women and the Workplace program. After consulting with the program coordinator and the GED instructor, all agreed that a writing workshop might enhance the program.

The woman-positive activity

Nancy set out three goals for the writing workshop: it should seek to increase the women's confidence as writers, it should encourage the women to see writing as a vehicle for exploring their experiences, and it should increase writing skills. The writing topics would address women's personal experiences, women's issues, and Native issues. At this point, Nancy contacted Betty-Ann Lloyd, the coordinating researcher, to get acquainted and discusss their possible participation in the second phase of the research.

The writing workshops began in October and occupied three to four hours each week. The women wrote on a variety of topics, ranging from older women role models to a critique of the justice system as it affects Native peoples. Various kinds of writing were encouraged, including letters to the editor, poems, essays, and books for their children.

"Katie — Woman

I remember my first sight of the woman.
I stood in the shadow of her doorway
I watched her cut her granddaughter's hair —
"Get away from there" she said to me
"Don't stand and stare" she scolded.

"What a hard woman, I thought in my child's mind.
A mean old woman, my eyes saw.

The years passed.
I heard small bits and pieces of her life:
Trapper, hard working, respected, wise.

All these words were used to describe this woman.
I grew up, met and married a trapper, raised four children.
I saw some of the world through the eyes of this woman.

The hands are old and pained with arthritis,
The hair is a steel grey.
The words I use to describe this woman we respected:
Wise, hardworking and trapper.

Alberta M.

Native Women Write Now, Fort McMurray: Keyano College, p. 3

Nancy is not Native, but other common ground was discovered, providing a catalyst for sharing experience. For example, she attended a primarily Native residential school, as did most of the participants in the program. Also, all of the women, Nancy included, had children at a fairly young age.

At the outset, Nancy asked the women if they would be willing to participate in the CCLOW research. She explained she would be participating in discussions with other program workers, as well as observing, writing, and reflecting on the workshop. She also asked if they would be willing to compile an anthology of the writings they produced. The women agreed to participate in the research and were especially keen to work on producing an anthology.

Jeanne MacIntyre worked closely with Nancy on the research, often providing a sounding board for Nancy as part of her reflective activity.

One area that Nancy explored was the difference in the dynamics of a women-only class compared to a men-only class. She has extensive experience teaching men-only groups because she is the instructor and manager of a workplace literacy program for workers in the tar sands. Her experience indicates that single sex groups interact similarly, be they women-only or men-only. However, she will soon teach a mixed sex workplace literacy group that may interact differently than the single sex groups. She was also interested in exploring how the instructor's sex, experience, and political perspective affects participation in both groups.

This is what happened

From a practical perspective, the writing workshop encouraged the women to explore writing as a vehicle for expressing their ideas, and these pieces of writing were published. The women are proud to have a record of their time together.

What happened with the women after the workshop ended in March 1992 is difficult to say because they have dispersed into the community. There has been no formal follow-up although when word got around that the funding had been acquired to publish their stories they contacted Nancy again to say how pleased they were.

What happened for the literacy practitioner was more evident. As a result of having been involved in the research and with the women-only group Nancy spoke at length about the issue of women and literacy to a newspaper reporter during World Literacy Week. Only when she heard herself committing to the issue in a very public way did she feel that something had happened for her. The articulation of the ideas was an important step. However, she still feels a little cautious and is concerned that a too firm stand on this sensitive issue could impact negatively on the community tutor program which she also coordinates.

Native Women Write Now

Description of Research: Native Women Write Now

During 1991-92 Keyano College participated in a national research project sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat on the issue of women and literacy. I participated by offering a writing workshop for aboriginal women who were involved in a program entitled Aboriginal Women and the Workplace. This 24 week program, funded by Employment and Immigration Canada, aimed to enhance the employability skills of native women by providing life skills and academic upgrading that would lead to successful completion of the GED. The writing skills workshop component was seen as complementary given its three goals: to increase the confidence of the women as writers, to encourage women to see writing as a vehicle for exploring their experience, and to increase their understanding of writing as a process.

The writing workshop was unique because of its women-centred approach. The women suggested the topics for writing, and their suggestions emerged from their respective personal, academic, and professional standpoints. The stories, poems, opinion pieces and book reviews clearly reflect their values, beliefs, and life situations. Throughout the workshops the women were strengthened by the ready acceptance of their positions, and the opportunity to explore and articulate those positions. Reading and discussion provided a foundation for the writing.

What the women have to say about their lives and about the lives of others who are important to them is a clear signal that literacy activities provide a worthy vehicle for personal growth and empowerment. But the learning is not all theirs. As readers, we can learn more about ourselves and our lives by reflecting upon their ideas. Their ideas can become our point of departure.

- Nancy Steel, Instructor

Aboriginal Women in the Workplace program participants enjoy a graduation moment in March, 1992

Editor
Nancy Steel

Contributors
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Preface

This booklet was written by women in a program called Aboriginal Women in the Workplace at Keyano College, Fort McMurray, AB.

Part of this course involved a writing workshop that offered us an opportunity to express our feelings about being native and being women. We shared a lot of ideas, had lively discussions, and expressed individual opinions. All this happened in a very short period of time because the program was 24 weeks long.

These poems, stories, essays and book reviews reflect yesterdays and todays cherished memories, opinions, and values. These pieces were written with humour, joy, pain, acceptance and hope for the future. We feel women are becoming stronger from the support they experience in groups like ours.

We invite you to explore our ideas, and experiences, and then to reflect and keep the circle strong.

Special thanks to Nancy Steel for giving us encouragement and inspiration to write these pieces.

- Aboriginal Women

The ideas that she expressed during the interview were really the result of having reflected on her experience as the facilitator of a women-only, woman-positive writing group. During the time that Nancy was facilitating the workshop she found it difficult to reflect on what was happening. However, after she finished the program and had some time for reflection, she was better able to consider the impact of the activity on her practice as a literacy worker.

She has become more aware that a literacy program for women is strongest when supported by other community agencies. She believes that women in literacy programs need to have learning happen in a safe environment that provides support in other areas of their lives.

She also believes that women need to be assured that their learning belongs to them and is not decided for them by others or managed for them by others. A woman-positive literacy program can encourage women to assume ownership of their learning and contribute to overall personal growth.

Nancy struggled with what it means to manage a woman-positive group. At first, she assumed that by virtue of being learner-centred, it would be woman-positive. She is currently gaining a new understanding of what it means to work with a group in a way that is woman-positive. For example, she feels one indication that the group is woman-positive is that the women have discovered some freedom in the writing workshops. They feel free to write about such issues as their experience with child abuse, their negative experiences as Natives with the justice system, their admiration for other women in their lives. These writing workshops have provided them with a voice, and the publication of the anthology ensured that their voices will be heard.

What happened for Nancy was not concrete and measurable. Rather, she gained a growing understanding that literacy programs need to explore and to focus on the unique learning needs and direction of women. To simply provide them with the same opportunities as men does not achieve equality but instead circumvents women's potential and needs.

What was produced

An eight-page tabloid collection of writing by women in the program was published in early 1993. Excerpts from Native Women Write Now are included in Women in literacy speak.

"We talked about how to make our literacy classes more feminist.

Adult Literacy and English as a Second Language College of New Caledonia Prince George, British Columbia

The main campus of the College of New Caledonia (CNC) is situated in Prince George, British Columbia, a city of 75,000. The Prince George economy relies heavily on the forest industry, with three pulp and paper companies providing the main employment in the region.

There are regional campuses of the College of New Caledonia located in Vanderhoof, Burns Lake, Quesnel, and McKenzie with approximately 1,000 students. The Prince George campus has 3,000 students. The student body is made up of adults from 18 to seniors, with the majority aged 19 to 35.

CNC has a division of Adult Basic Education with 285 full-time and 300 part-time students working at academic upgrading to high school graduation as well as GED. The English as a Second Language program offers beginner, intermediate, and advanced classes. CNC also offers trades, business, and university transfer programs, with the majority of students on the main campus enrolled in university transfer courses.

There is a Status of Women Committee at the Prince George Campus of CNC that includes faculty, administration, and support staff.

Involvement in the CCLOW research project

As members of the national Feminist Literacy Workers Network, Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney received information about the research and the report in a mail-out. They became interested in participating after reading Discovering the strength of our voices. Mary Ann works full-time in the English as a Second Language department at CNC and Paula works half-time as the coordinator of a one-on-one volunteer literacy tutoring program, also located at CNC. They have worked together in the past.

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"Maybe a literacy classroom is not the place for feminist activity as we came to define it during this research project. But maybe it is the place for a woman-positive approach: an approach that supports women where they are, challenges them with new ideas about their lives and experiences. At this stage in our development as feminist literacy workers we are comfortable taking a woman-positive approach in the classroom. Our hesitancy to act feminist does not stem from lack of belief in feminist philosophy but rather from our inability to present these ideas in ways that are meaningful to our students. However, we view ourselves as at a stage in a process that will eventually help us develop the skills necessary to bring a pro-active feminist perspective to our classroom practice.

Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney, "More than semantics"

Because of their shared educational philosophy, Mary Ann and Paula had already talked about team teaching a literacy-level writing group. They wanted to encourage students to improve their writing skills beyond the functional limitations normally imposed upon literacy students. After reading the report of the first phase, they decided that bringing a woman-positive approach to that writing group would be challenging to them as instructors and of interest to the students.

The woman-positive activity

Initially, Paula and Mary Ann defined "woman-positive" as intellectually acknowledging that women have something unique to say, that this uniqueness needs to be given a place to develop and be expressed, that it needs to be validated, and that it is not normally addressed in literacy programs.

After talking with their administrator, the chair of the College Foundations Division at CNC, they undertook the writing group as part of the CCLOW research. The group met once a week for two hours and was free. It was not part of the regular, articulated curriculum at CNC.

The writing group was initially advertised through existing literacy programs, including English as a Second Language, with students being encouraged to bring friends or family not currently involved in any upgrading program. The participants of the course turned out to be mostly English as a Second Language students and mostly women.

Paula and Mary Ann explored their own understanding and practice of facilitating woman-positive activities as they worked with a mixed group of women and men in a class that was not specifically concerned with women's issues. They also looked at their work in a second section that had been advertised and discussed as a writing group that would also look at women's issues.

They planned to present their research through writing and publishing a journal article as well as offering a workshop at a conference for women in post-secondary education.

This is what happened

During the course of the two writing groups, Paula and Mary Ann were able to recognize the substantial literacy gains made by their students. They had some concern, however, about the quality and quantity of woman-positive activities they were able to introduce into the classroom.

Paula and Mary Ann began to explore, in their journals, why they found it so difficult to identify and incorporate woman-positive activities in the classroom. During this exploration, the focus of their research shifted from the work of the students to the work of the teachers,

More than semantics: Reflections on "feminist"/"woman-positive" practices in a literacy classroom

Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney
College of New Caledonia, Prince George, BC

For the past year we have been examining, discussing, analyzing, and keeping journals about our teaching practice. This process has been exciting, enervating, and painful. In this article we'd like to share some of that process.

In the spring of 1991, The Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) released the initial report of a two phase research project called Discovering the strength of our voices: Women and literacy programs (Lloyd, 1991a). Phase one of the research looked into women's experiences in literacy programs. As they said in their kit, at the end of this research one thing seemed clear — if literacy work is done in a way that is good for women, then it will have to be done differently than it is now. This result led to phase two of the research centring around the question of what actually happens when women in a literacy program decide to do something woman-positive, something specifically for women. Interested women literacy workers were invited to participate in this phase of the research. As literacy instructors and feminists, we thought this would be an interesting project to be involved in and so we signed up.

We are two women who teach at a local community college. We have worked in the field of English as a Second Language, Upgrading, and Adult Literacy for many years. The idea of doing something specifically for women students appealed to us both. We had already planned to team teach a weekly writing group for literacy level students and saw this as a wonderful opportunity to actively combine two topics that we care about very much — literacy and women's issues.

In retrospect we did not think out very clearly how we would do something specifically for women within this literacy writing group. Our initial plan for the research was to observe and record what happened in our classroom, in our institution, and in our relationships with colleagues when we openly brought an attitude that was positive to women into this literacy class. Because both of us share similar teaching philosophies and feminist viewpoints, we assumed this project would be fun, interesting, and beneficial to us and our students. What we didn't realize was how WE would become the focus of the research!

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themselves. They made this shift as a result of having the opportunity to reflect together on their classroom practice as feminist literacy workers.

During the development of this reflection, they were surprised and puzzled to discover that their feminist philosophy did not seem to impact in any significant way on their classroom practice. As a result of their reflections, they identified the following questions:

- How do we introduce woman-positive issues into the classroom?
- If we consider ourselves feminists, why haven't we already been doing this?
- Has our feminism affected our teaching in any way? How?
- Who and/or what has kept us from doing woman-positive work in the classroom in the past? Why? How?
- So what do we do with the answers to these questions?

They decided to explore these questions by writing an article.

What was produced

Paula and Mary Ann completed an article, "More than semantics: Reflections on 'feminist'/'woman-positive' practices in a literacy classroom." It is published in Women in literacy speak. They also did a workshop called "Making the classroom positive for women" at the Adult Basic Education conference in BC in April, 1993.

"We talked about having a women's class and a men's class.

Fundamentals English Classes
Malaspina College, Cowichan Campus
Duncan, B.C.

Cowichan Campus of Malaspina College is in Duncan on Vancouver Island. This is a town of about 8,000 people located in an area called the Cowichan/Chemainus Valleys which has about 60,000 people. Malaspina College also includes a larger campus of about 5,000 students in Nanaimo and two smaller campuses in Parksville and Powell River. Cowichan Campus has about 2,000 students, including an Adult Basic Education (ABE) division of 300 students. Other programs include vocational courses such as office administration and continuing care assistant, a Native Indian Teacher Education Program, a large community education program, and two years of university transfer credit courses. The college has recently become a degree-granting institution. Funding for ABE programs comes mainly from the provincial government, with special projects and particular classes funded by the federal government or First Nations band councils.

The campus is on land belonging to the Cowichan Band. The student body varies, with about twenty percent First Nations students. The students in ABE tend to be older and poorer than the general student body, with a significantly larger number of First Nations students, students with disabilities, and those who are single mothers.

There are eight full-time staff in the ABE Division. Five are women and three are men. The campus principal is a woman and almost all the administrative staff are women. About half of the students in ABE are women. In terms of age, they cluster around 25 to 35. They can attend either full-time or part-time, and typically come in to take English, math, computer studies, and science, to complete high school work required for entry into post-secondary programs, or to get a grade 12 certificate.

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"I might say, for example, that our whole project turned out to be not woman-positive at all because we managed to put those women through an hour meeting where they got shouted at by two or three men and they felt so intimidated that they felt they couldn't express themselves and in the end didn't get what they needed to. You could be so bold as to think about what they needed. Or at least what they may have figured out that they would choose if they had been given an opportunity to choose. And so our woman-positive activity started off being a woman-negative activity because of the way we chose to organize it.

Kate Nonesuch, Interview 2

Involvement in the CCLOW research project

Cowichan Campus took part in the first, exploratory phase of the CCLOW research on women and literacy. One of the instructors, Evelyn Battell, was at that time a member of the advisory committee for the research project. She is also a member of the CCLOW board's literacy committee. During the first phase, she arranged for interviews with a variety of staff members and for three morning discussions among a group of women students, facilitated by another instructor, Kate Nonesuch.

When CCLOW received funding for the second phase of the research, Cowichan Campus was again interested in participating.

The woman-positive activity

The woman-positive activity proposed at Cowichan Campus was a women-only literacy class. Instructors Kate Nonesuch and Vicki Noonan proposed that the students in the fundamentals program be divided into two classes along sex lines instead of along ability lines as was the custom. For the twelve hours of English instruction each week, Kate would teach a women-only class and Vicki would teach a men-only class. Students would continue in mixed-sex level 1 and 2 classes for math, and the English classes would get together to do special projects, see films, and so on. The class was proposed for one term, the five months from February to June. No additional resources would be required to accommodate this proposal.

This is what happened

Kate first talked with the coordinator of the ABE Department who suggested she write up the proposal for further consideration. Kate and Vicki then developed a rationale for the proposal and some details about implementation.

The rationale for this proposal was that it would provide a more effective context for the discussion and experiential writing that is crucial to developing reading and writing skills. On an educational level, it was understood as equally beneficial for women and men. Both groups would be able to focus on issues that were of particular interest to them. From past experience, the instructors assumed the men would choose to spend more time on issues such as paid employment and traditional hunting and fishing. The women would spend more time on issues such as parenting, non-traditional work, violence, and sexual abuse.

Vicki and Kate also suggested that with split classes they would be better able to provide a safe and creative setting for considering some of the social, economic, and personal aspects of students' lives. Again, experience had shown that class dynamics in a mixed-sex class often

"I've just been talking to students about what they were interested in writing about and what they told me was not what I expected them to tell me. I was surprised at a lot of what they said — it wasn't what I predicted. It wasn't that the women were all interested in this, and the men were all interested in that. It wasn't like that at all.

I had never asked the students, "Okay what do you want to read about?" Which sounds really awful when you think about it. It should have been something I've been doing for years. But I always took it upon myself to think, "What should I give them, what will they be interested in?"

Now, I think that you always have to ask students: "Okay, we're finished with this, what would you like to do next? Here are some things I've thought of, what about you?" And people will surprise you every time because you think you have a real read on your students. And you don't. They still come up with things you wouldn't have thought they are interested in.

Vicki Noonan, Interview 2

resulted in frustration for students and staff. In many cases, white men tended to set the agenda and dominate the discussion. Women often found it difficult to find the space to speak, particularly if they disagreed with the men or wanted to talk about something the men weren't interested in. When the instructors worked to create space for the women, the dominant men became frustrated with the imposed silence since they wanted to continue their discussion.

The written proposal included the statement, "The Fundamentals Department proposes some changes be made to study the effects of same-sex classes on student success and retention at the Fundamentals English level." The proposal was taken to the ABE faculty meeting, where it was approved.

Proposals for new kinds of programming are usually taken to the CIGS, the Cowichan Instructional Coordination Group, a committee composed of representatives of various departments on campus, including ABE and student services. CIGS supported the proposal and made some suggestions. They wanted to provide extra support from counselling for the separate classes, perhaps in the form of a counsellor coming to each class for an hour a week for a class meeting and being available for individual counselling at other times. They also suggested an evaluation process be in place when classes were started. The committee wanted to be sure that the form of the class would be advertised so that students joining the classes would not be surprised at finding themselves in a same-sex group.

At the time of the proposal, the level 1 and 2 classes included twelve women and twelve men. Eight of the men and five of the women were First Nations students, three of the women were Chinese-speaking immigrants, there were four students with physical, visual, and learning disabilities, and approximately fourteen of the students were under 30.

Kate and Vicki decided to put the proposal to the students in the fundamentals classes for their approval. At a meeting of all students from level 1 and 2, they described what they proposed and gave some reasons for it:

- that they found that men and women students often had different interests, and wanted to talk and write about different things
- that men tended to talk more in the class
- that women had a hard time getting their views across
- that men were often frustrated by a teacher trying to get them to be quiet long enough for the women to feel comfortable to speak
- that the teachers found it hard to facilitate such discussions.

Discussion of the proposal was dominated entirely by men. One man spoke briefly and somewhat disjointedly in favour of the proposal. He thought it would be good for men to be together to talk about their

"If I had to do it again, I would approach the students differently. I would talk to the women and when there was a consensus that they would like a women's class, I would talk to the men separately. If the women were agreed that they wanted a women's class, it could be arranged like that; the other class could be a regular class, with all the men in it and any women who didn't want to be in the women's class.

This is a re-learning of something I already knew — that women who want to make their situation better have to get together and figure out what they want and strategize about how to get it before they talk to people in power about it.

It might have been possible to go ahead with splitting the classes without consulting the students — certainly that was not required by the administration, but I think the class would be stronger if the women were involved in the decision.

Kate Nonesuch, Interview 2

feelings. Another spoke long and often to say it was a stupid idea. He said that school was not a place to discuss feelings, that you come to do your work and that was all, and there was no need to split the class up. A third man spoke once in a very angry tone. He said he liked to look at girls, to talk to girls, to work with girls, and he was not into a macho trip and did not want to be in a class with all guys.

Except for one women who spoke early in the discussion about her positive experience in another all-woman class, none of the women spoke, although the two teachers encouraged them as much as possible, by saying such things as, "I'd like to hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet," and making eye contact with women and asking if they had anything to say.

At the end of the discussion, the class broke for lunch and were to vote afterwards. Just as the class was breaking up, but before anyone had left the tables, the counsellor who was there as an observer said that he agreed with the last speaker, he really preferred to work in a mixed group.

After lunch, the class voted nine to one against splitting up the fundamentals class into same-sex groups. A couple of women did not vote because they did not plan to be in the class next term. As a result of the vote, the plan was dropped.

7

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Feminist Literacy Workers' Network

At the Literacy 2000 Conference in New Westminster, BC, October 1990, a group of women asked the support of the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) in forming a network for all women working in the field of literacy, whether they be students, workers, researchers, or volunteers. The main goals were to:

- create a feminist literacy workers' network
- organize a national conference on feminism and literacy

The Feminist Literacy Workers' Network was born. A conference was held on May 15-17, 1992, at the University of British Columbia. During the discussions the objectives of FLWN were stated as:

- to be a national voice for women's literacy
- to coordinate with other groups to lobby for funding and improved access for women
- to raise awareness of feminist issues
- to promote feminist analysis
- to build a strong FLWN national network
- to provide on-going personal and professional support for FLWN members (including volunteers)
- to explore the possibility of forming a union
- to support women learners
- to promote feminist literacy research on topics such as: women's ways of knowing, feminism across cultures and classes, violence against women, language, and imagery.

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Le Réseau d'action éducation femmes

Le Réseau national d'action éducation femmes est un organisme national voué à la promotion de l'éducation sous toutes ses formes, pour les femmes francophones du pays. L'Alphabétisation est un des dossiers priorisés au RNAÉF. En juin 1987, on assistait à la création du premier comité «ALPHA».

La participation des membres du comité à divers événements leur permit de constater que l'absence d'un mouvement canadien francophone en alphabétisation, aidait à nourrir l'isolement des intervenantes et intervenants préoccuppées-és par l'alphabétisation chez les femmes francophones du pays.

À partir de ces constats, le RNAÉF a organisé une rencontre nationale le 11 mai 1989 à Ottawa. Des intervenantes et des apprenantes de toutes les provinces du pays se sont donc réunies pour permettre au RNAÉF de mieux situer la problématique des femmes francophones face àl'alphabétisation et ce, à partir de ce qu'elles avaient à exprimer.

La rencontre nationale a démontré que l'analphabétisme des femmes est un problème tout à fait particulier. Les femmes ont besoin de facilités de transport et de services de garde. Au cours d'ateliers dont les horaires sont adaptés à leur disponibilité, elles ont également besoin de matériel et de situation d'apprentissage liés à leurs préoccupations.

Alors que les hommes sont enouragés à s'alphabétiser pour des raisons professionnelles, les femmes veulent souvent apprendre à lire, écrire et compter pour des motifs rattachés à leur rôle social de mère, d'éducatrice et de responsable de l'économie domestique au sein de la famille.

Suite aux recommandations de la rencontre nationale, le comité Alpha du RNAÉF a alors reçu le mandat de produire un guide à l'intention des formatrices, traitant de plusieurs aspects de l'alphabétisation. Ce guide intitulé «L'alphabétisation des femmes francophones, Guide àl'intention des formatrices» et publié en 1990, aide les formatrices dans leurs tâches quotidiennes auprès des femmes en démarche d'alphabétisation. Le guide vient d'être inclus dans la base de données «ERIC» (la deuxième plus grande en Amérique), créée par le Centre linguistique de Washington aux États-Unis.

Une recherche-action sur l'alphabétisation des femmes francophones et le milieu de travail a été complétée en 1992 et ce projet a donné lieu à la création de deux documents: un recueil de textes, «Prenons la parole : des femmes francophones parlent d'elles» et un rapport d'enquête, «Pour les femmes francophones, l'alphabétisation en milieu de travail?». Le lancement officiel de ce dernier document inaugurait la Semaine national de l'éducation des femmes francophones 1992.

Le recueil de textes sert maintenant de matériel d'alphabétisation et de sensibilisation et le rapport d'enquête est destiné aux syndicats, au patronat et aux responsables de la formation professionnelle. Ces documents aident àdéfinir les conditions favorisant à la fois la participation des femmes francophones à des programmes d'alphabétisation et leur intégration au marché du travail.

Pour information:
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This is the report of the first phase of CCLOW's research into the experience of women in literacy programs. Researched and compiled by Betty-Ann Lloyd, this exploratory report documents the concerns and questions of women students and staff in four literacy programs across Canada.

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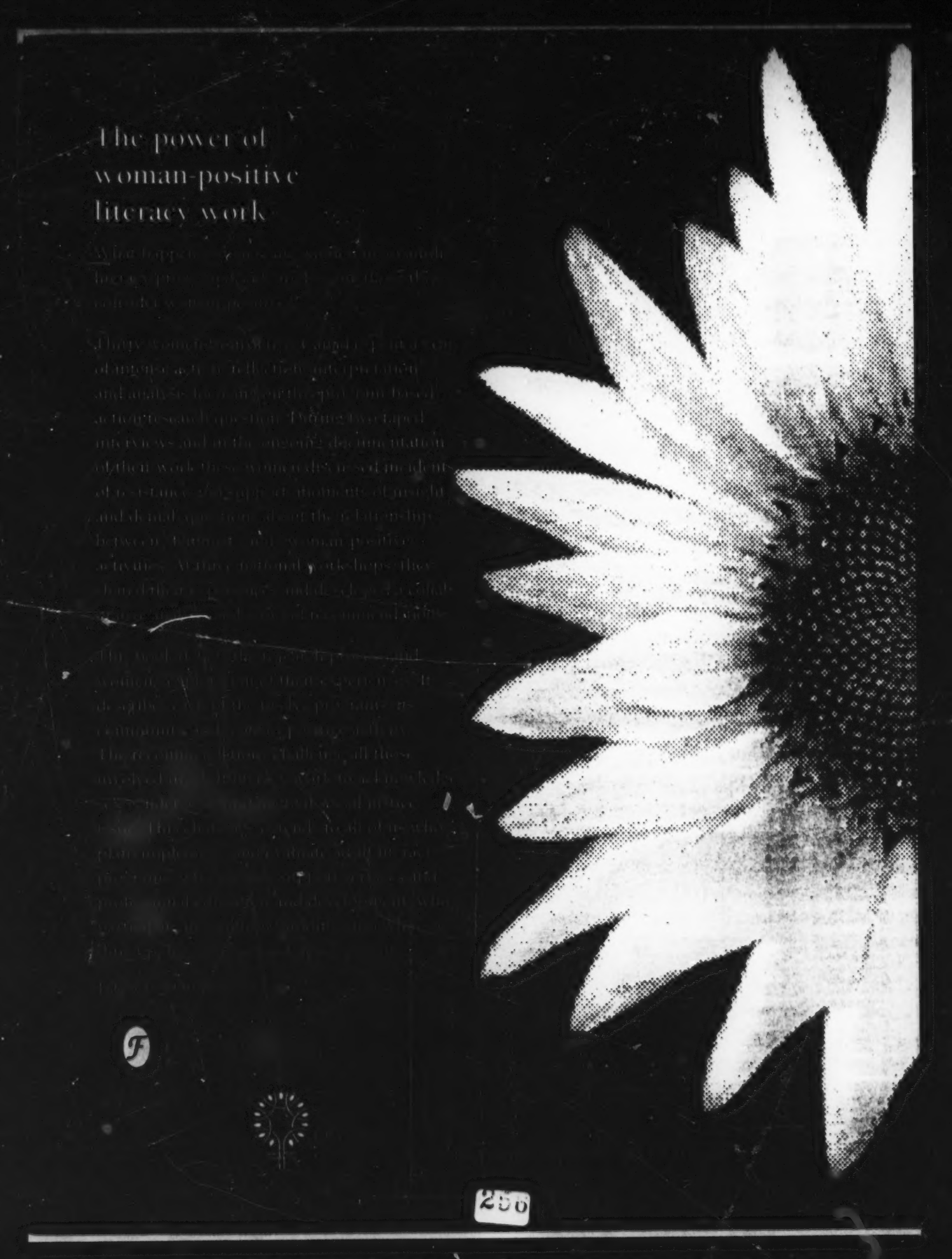

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